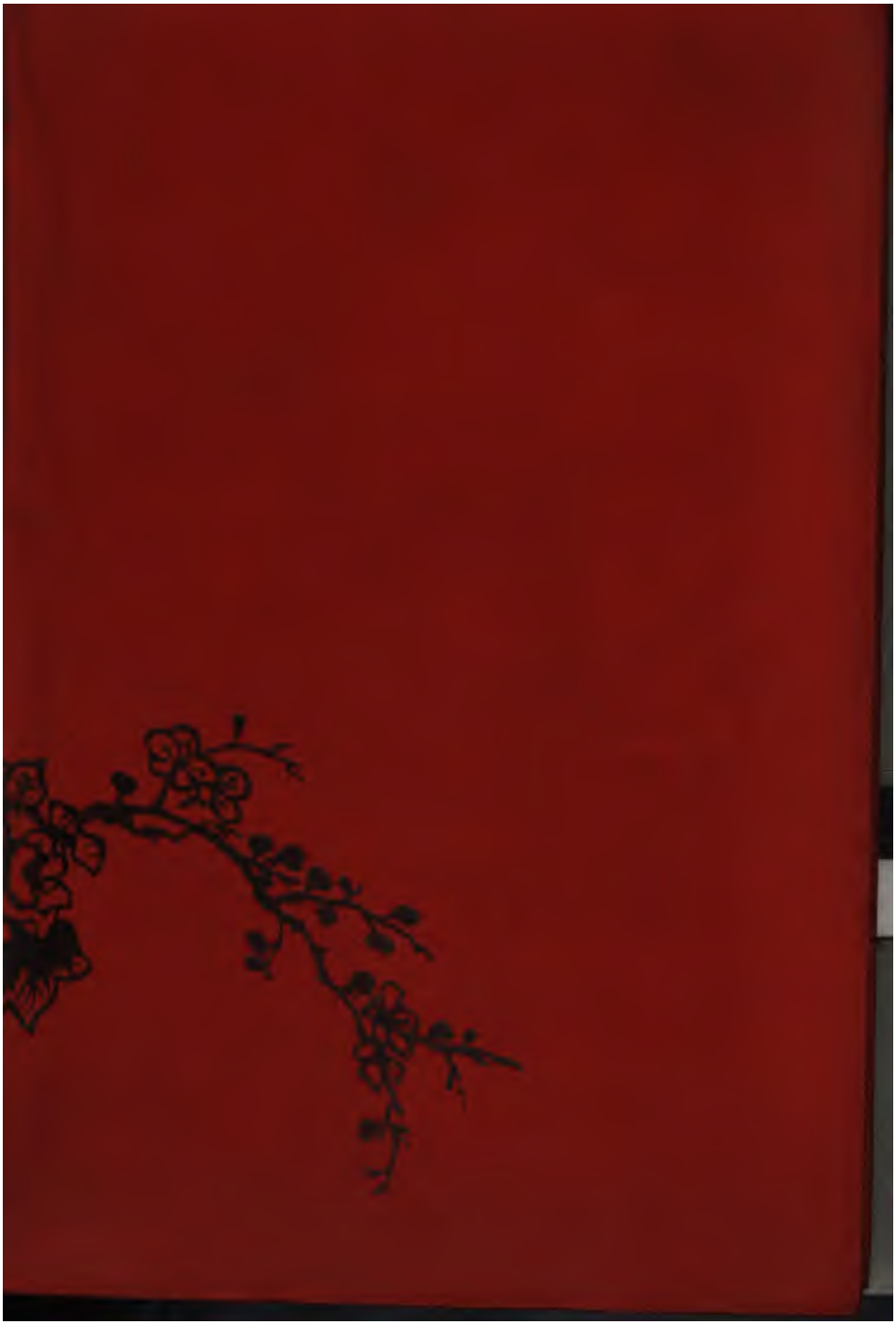

FAUSTINE

FAUSTINE

A Novel

BY

"RITA"

Author of "My Lady Coquette," "Adrienne," "Fragoletta," "Countess Daphne," etc.

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FAUSTINE.

PROLOGUE.

Over the white winding road the autumn sunshine burned, hot, glaring, and brilliant, but within the woods that lay on either side all was cool and dusk and still.

The music of a brook hidden in some leafy hollow, the flutter of a bird's wing stirring the boughs—these alone disturbed the silence. The wood was a nook of forest land in a district of Southern France—a beautiful, dreamy, shadowy, place, with the heat and noise and turmoil of the busy world shut out and forgotten, and where Nature held a court that was exclusively her own, and with which no human laws had yet interfered.

The birds and the bees and the butterflies

had the wood all to themselves now, and the brown brook sang its own song as it chattered over the pebbles and caught here and there a glancing sunbeam from amidst the veil of leafage, and let it dance among its ripples and gleam upon its depths. The hushed sweet peace of the country reigned around; the white road seemed deserted; only afar off a dark speck moved, with slow uncertain motion—something so far away and shadowy and indistinct, that it might have been a cloud of smoke from burning weeds, or a human figure. There was no one to note it or to speculate on its identity with either. The hours went on, the golden glory of the day was changing to the grayness of twilight. Sombre shadows stole among the wood, and wrapped it in the mystery of darkness, and the silence grew deeper and more deep, while afar off rang out the slow sweet chimes of a convent bell.

The little dark speck, no bigger than a cloud, was visible no longer on the road, but close to the wood, and peering eagerly into its dim recesses, now stood a man. He seemed heavily burdened, for he carried something large and bulky in his arms, and the sweat stood in great beads on his

brow, while through the stillness the sound of his laboured breathing came in quick oppressive gasps. For a moment he leant against the stem of a tree as if for support, and his eyes glanced furtively from side to side with that restless apprehensive gaze which is born of fear or guilt. When he had recovered breath, he once more drew himself erect, and then, with a last look over the deserted road, he plunged into the depths of woodland, over which the twilight shadows threw so dark a veil.

Where the shafts of sunlight had fallen, now quivered the pale sweet luminance of moonbeams.

The grasses were wet with dew; the faint hoot of a night-bird sounded weird and eerie through the silence. The mosses and creepers that hung in strange festoons among the branches gleamed filmlike and silvery with the moisture of the dew and the dewfall and the sheen of the moon-rays. A footfall broke the solemn stillness; a figure came with swift uncertain steps through the aisles of the stirless trees. The pale weird light fell on a human face, cruel-looking, and with a coward's fear in the shrinking eyes and quivering lips. On, on, with hurrying steps and bated breath, he pressed; on, on, among the crowding trunks that

seemed now like a phalanx of opposing force bidding defiance to his efforts at escape; on, on, while the cold clammy touch of the hanging mosses smote his brow and made him shudder as if at the touch of a dead hand; on, on, with the dry twigs crackling beneath his feet and the tossing leaves above his head; on till the road was reached again and the ghostlike sights and sounds of the wood were left behind.

Then he paused a moment, and keeping still in the shadow of the great tree-trunks, looked warily up and down the long white road once more.

All was still and deserted. Only the cold pale moon lit up its solitude, and her light alone fell on the dark and evil face that peered forth from its hiding-place.

Then, with swift steps, the man took his way once more, leaving the silence and solitude of the wood behind him.

The night-moths fluttered to and fro among the leaves and mosses; the cries of the owls, the whir of the bats' wings; the strange tumultuous stir and flutter of life that have in them so weird a terror—all these went on their way and filled the air and haunted the hours as the darkness

passed onwards to the reawakened glory of dawn.

All these—yes, and one other sound, new and strange to the heart of those woodland solitudes.

It was the feeble piteous wail of a little child.

Book I.

CHAPTER I.

"THE ELEMENT THAT IS BOTH FRIEND AND FOE."

It was evening in Paris.

A cold chill wind, in whose breath winter still struggled with spring for pre-eminence, was blowing through the lamp-lit streets. The sky was without stars, and dark clouds drifted here and there in stormy masses, contrasting forcibly with the glare and glitter below. Before one of the most popular theatres a vast crowd had assembled. Amongst it were two young Englishmen, who were listening with considerable amusement to the fire of question, answer, and repartee going on around them.

"Is it, then, certain she will be here to-night?"

"Of course, silly one. Hast thou not read the bills?"

"She is then quite recovered from her illness,"

said a pretty girl, who was clinging closely to the arm of a handsome young artisan. "Ah! but it is long since she appeared. Dost thou remember her, Antoine?"

"Remember her? Who would not that had once seen her?" was the rejoinder.

"And is she beautiful?"

"Beautiful! Thou shalt see for thyself, little one! She scarce would have won so great a name were she *not*—at least in Paris."

"But she has talent too, Antoine; so they say."

"Talent—yes. She has the talent that pays best now. She dresses exquisitely, sings divinely, and looks like a picture—*voilà tout!*"

"And enough, I should think—even for Paris," said one of the Englishmen to his companion. "We are getting critical, it seems. Offenbach discussed by a blouse, and beauty dissected by the workroom! What do you think of that, Cecil?"

"Natural enough. This is the age of progress and the march of intellect. Its effects are visible first among the class who have been so long denied voice or power of their own."

"Do you anticipate another revolution then?"

"Not such a one as you mean. A revolution of thought, feeling, opinion, I do anticipate and hope to see."

"Who is this actress they have been discussing? Do you know?"

"Not at all. I seldom go to theatres, and I detest opéra bouffe!"

"You are such a modest young man, Cis! What a pity you are not the head of the family. We should have you performing miracles in the shape of improvements, alterations, and innovations, through the length and breadth of the country. That reminds me, by-the-bye, why does not Malden stand for your borough?"

"Why? for the best of all reasons, and about the only one he ever troubles himself to give. He doesn't like the bother, or feel capable of undertaking it."

"Then you might step in, Cis. What's to prevent it?"

A pained look crossed the bright open face of the young man. "Everything," he said laconically; "but, chief of all—appearances. It would hardly do for the younger brother to accept

what the elder has refused. Besides, it has even not been offered me!"

"But it may be; and then?"

"I should decline it."

"It's a beastly shame the way younger sons are served! Don't you think so, Cecil?"

"The law of primogeniture has had its attendant inconveniences ever since the days of Esau," said the other. "I expect it will continue to have them until the millennium!"

At this juncture the doors of the theatre opened, and the two friends were carried along by the tide of human life around them, until they found themselves at the box-office.

Paying down their money, they shortly afterwards found themselves in one of the daintiest and prettiest of all the many dainty and pretty temples erected to Thalia.

"Not Offenbach after all," said Cecil Calverley's companion, Lord Danvers, as he looked at his programme. "A novelty, by all that's wonderful! and written expressly for Mdlle. Thé d'Egmont. Well, we're in for it, I suppose, Cis. I've often heard of her, but never seen her."

"Probably," answered Cecil listlessly, as his

eyes wandered over the rapidly-filling house. "How crowded the theatre is to-night!"

"By Jove! if there isn't Lady Gustavus and her triad of daughters there, in the box opposite! Look, Cis."

"So it is. I wonder what brings her to Paris at this time of the year. Pursuit of game, I suppose. I wonder who's the object of her maternal devotion now?"

"Lady Irene, evidently. See how sweetly she is whispering and smiling. Can't you imagine, Danvers, what's going on?"

"Take care of the draught, my love; are you sure you are comfortable, my sweet; do keep your cloak round you, you know how delicate you are, etc.," mimicked Lord Danvers. "Ridiculous old woman! How hot she was after your brother last season, Cecil; but it was no use, I suppose?"

"No; Malden is very unimpressionable, and if he ever did take a wife, I'm sure it wouldn't be one of whose delicacy of constitution and sensitive disposition he was always being assured by her mother!"

"I daresay not. Ah, there's the curtain rising. Now to be bored as usual."

With a sigh of resignation the young man leant back in his seat, and fixed his eyes on the stage.

It was impossible to discover what was the subject of the piece at first; it seemed one of those fairylike burlesques, wholly nonsensical and half unintelligible, of which the French are so fond.

A scene of wood, and water, and aisles of roses, and plashing fountains, where airy sylphs floated and danced to strains of music, and sang comic choruses that raised shouts of laughter and storms of applause. A scene that made the Englishmen shrug their shoulders, and growl denunciations on their light-hearted mercurial neighbours, and mutter "Trash!" under their thick moustaches.

But suddenly the lights were dimmed, the airy dancers retreated to the wood beyond and grouped themselves amidst the rose-aisles, with due regard to effect and—exposure! Then from amidst the leafy background a slender graceful form came floating forwards, a striking contrast to the massed loveliness of the dancing-girls in the simplicity of her attire and the modest grace of her actions.

She was exquisitely beautiful — fair as the lily she represented, with sunny flower-crowned hair, and soft azure eyes, and a voice sweet and true and far-reaching as the mirth of a lark.

Amidst all the riot of sound and noisy declamation and confusion of dancing that ever and anon surrounded her she stood out clear and distinct among the rest—her dainty loveliness, her perfect grace, and her marvellous voice winning for her constant and rapturous applause.

"The idea of a woman like that turning burlesque actress! It is shameful!" exclaimed Cecil, after the curtain had descended on the first act. "I wonder she degrades her talent by performing such nonsense!"

"The audience don't seem to think it nonsense!" exclaimed Lord Danvers. "Scenic effects, unredeemed vulgarity, and broad allusions, combined with unlimited breakdowns and comic choruses, is the acme of dramatic success in the present day. The worst of it is, the mischief is creeping our way too. Passion, and pathos, and genius are all thrown away. The English stage, like that of its fantastical neighbour, appeals to popular

taste through the medium of vulgarity and *bizarrerie.* It may ruin morals, destroy art, and desecrate better feeling, but—it pays!"

"The *raison d'être* of everything nowadays," said Cecil thoughtfully. "But what do you think of Thé d'Egmont? Doesn't she seem out of place here to you?"

"You mean to *you!*" laughed his friend. "My dear Cis, don't afflict your tender heart by suppositions of that sort. An actress is the most delusive of all her delusive sex. As for being out of place, do you think she would undertake a part for which she was unfitted or disinclined?"

"But if popular taste runs in one groove, actresses like writers must supply it. If burlesque is to be the order of the day they must act burlesque, or starve."

"True enough. Of course, they are more sinned against than sinning; of course, they have not created a demand in the first place to supply it in the next; of course, they are angels in tights and tinsel; we all know that. Dear Cis, what a boy you are in some things still!"

"Am I?" laughed Cecil. "It's a thing of which I can't accuse you, at all events, Danvers.

You are almost as cynical, and quite as faithless, as my old enemy, Père Jerome."

"How is that worthy Jesuit, by-the-bye? Have you come across him lately?"

"We met last in the heart of a French wood, and under somewhat peculiar circumstances," said Cecil gravely. "I was astonished to find him there, but he told me he was going to some home or convent on business."

"As father confessor, of course?"

"I did not ask. We began our usual disagreements very speedily."

"And you, as usual, had the best of it?"

"I don't know that. The truth is, Danvers, I had an adventure in that same wood—at least that's to say, I made a discovery. I found a child!"

"A child! What on earth did you do with it?"

"I was extremely puzzled at first, I can tell you. The sound of cries first attracted my attention, and then I found it had been tied to a tree and left to perish in the heart of this lonely wood. Of course I unfastened it, took it with me, and was just debating what I should do to find

some place of shelter, when up comes Père Jerome——"

"Phew-w-w!"

"What does that significant whistle mean, Danvers?"

"Odd, don't you think, that he should have been in the neighbourhood at that time?"

"His reasons were plausible enough."

"That I don't doubt. But go on; your adventure has a tinge of romance that interests me."

"After much hesitation I agreed to leave the child at a convent in the neighbourhood. It is a retreat dedicated to Notre Dame de Bon Secours, and especially devoted to works of charity and penance."

"I wonder what took Father Jerome there, then? Neither is much in his line."

"How you do interrupt a fellow, Danvers! Well, I left the little thing——"

"Boy or girl, Cis?"

"Girl. I left her, as I said, with the Mother Superior, only stipulating that I was to see her at intervals if I felt disposed."

"What an odd idea! Are you going to adopt her, old boy?"

"No, of course not; but I feel an interest in her, naturally."

"Isn't that coming it rather strong, Cis?"

"You are as bad as Father Jerome," said the young man angrily. "I declare I won't tell you any more."

"Is there any more?"

"Of course. I made every inquiry possible. I advertised——"

"Oh Cis, Cis, you'll kill me! Did you really suppose that after such an evident inclination for infanticide, the real owners of this lost property would be likely to come forward?"

"I hardly supposed it. I merely thought I might get some clue, some information respecting her. But I've not succeeded."

"You surprise me!"

"There—my story's done; and the curtain's rising. She looks more lovely than ever, doesn't she?"

"Gaslight and *tulle illusion*, my dear boy. What nonsense she's talking, to be sure!"

"But what a mouth to talk it with!——My God! Danvers, what's that?"

For at this moment a terrific report shook

the theatre to its foundations. Thick volumes of smoke issued from below the stage and sheets of flame burst in on every side.

The vast audience rose like one man. Cries of "Fire! fire!" resounded in all directions. Howling, shrieking, stamping, like mad things, they rushed to the entrance. On the stage, in her fluttering gossamer and tinselled glitter of fairyism, a woman stood like one dazed and stupefied by a sudden shock, while sheets of flame, and clouds of smoke, and the odour of charred wood and burning stuffs, blinded and dazzled her senses.

Suddenly, in a moment, she was conscious of a kind voice whispering cheering words, of a strong eager clasp, that raised and bore her through burning wood and crashing timbers, how and where she knew not, till the cool night air was on her brow and reviving her swooning senses.

Like a living river, the wild throng swept from the doors, the strong trampling the weak, and forcing their way in terrified blindness over crushed and trodden bodies. On every face was fear, on every lip that one dread cry of "Fire!"

The rescuer and rescued turned swiftly away from the frightful tumult and hurried down a quiet narrow street close by.

"We are safe now. You had better rest a moment. I trust you are not hurt," said Cecil to his companion.

She turned and looked at him; at his flushed face, his panting chest, his brave, bold, handsome head towering above her in the lamplight. Her white lips parted, as if to speak, but no words came. She gave one sobbing sigh, as of intense terror, and fell forward at his feet like one dead.

CHAPTER II.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

For a moment Cecil stood there bewildered. There was not a living creature to be seen near at hand, though from the streets he had just quitted came the cries and shrieks of frightened women and the hoarser voices of men.

That the theatre was on fire was evident now, for the sky was red with the glow of lurid light and the air thick with sulphurous smoke, while the rapid rush of engines and the shouts of the coming firemen added fresh confusion to the scene.

The young man knelt down by the side of his senseless companion, and fanned her brow and chafed her small cold hands in his. But for long she manifested no signs of life—only lay there in his arms like a beautiful statue, with the chill moon-rays on her face, and the cold night

wind stirring the filmy gauze and laces of her dress.

"She will die with cold," thought the young man in alarm, and hastily unbuttoning his own overcoat, he wrapped it round her bare and snowy shoulders.

At last she moved and opened her eyes. Dizzy and bewildered still by the awful fear that had struck her down on the burning stage, they rested on the face of her preserver. She rose hurriedly, and, trembling in every limb, poured forth a stream of broken words with all the eloquence of foreign tongue and action!

"Say nothing about it; there is no need," said the young Englishman. "If you will give me permission I will see if I can find a cab for you. Do you think you are well enough to go home now?"

She understood so well his delicacy in putting the question thus. He would not take advantage of the situation to discover her address or force his companionship on her. How few of the men she had ever known would have acted with such deference to the feelings of an actress!

"I am quite well—quite recovered, monsieur,"

she said. "As for thanking you for your great bravery and kindness, that I cannot do; it is more than words have power for, or life has means."

"Oh, it is nothing! Pray don't trouble to speak of such a trifle. If I hadn't done it someone else would," returned Cecil, a little ungraciously, and with all the horror of an Englishman for a scene. "Can I leave you here, or will you accompany me?"

"I will go with you. I dare not remain alone here," she said, taking the arm he offered. "Ah, mon Dieu! that fire—how terrible it is!"

"Do not look at it," he said gently. "It will unnerve you again. We must go this way to avoid the crowd."

She trembled visibly. The horror of that scene was still upon her; the thought that she might now be lying beneath those burning timbers a charred and lifeless mass, with no remnant of the beauty and grace that had enthralled her audience but one short hour before. In silence Cecil led her through the narrow gloomy lane, and when they reached a broader and better thoroughfare he hailed the first passing cab and placed her within.

"Perhaps you would rather direct the man yourself?" he said hesitatingly, as he stood with the door in his hand.

"Not at all. My address is no secret from you," she said softly. "To-morrow, monsieur, at noon, if you have the leisure or inclination to renew our acquaintance, I shall be happy to receive you."

Cecil bowed silently, and seeing he waited for her directions, she said hurriedly:

"I live at 13, Rue de la Couronne."

He lifted his hat, closed the door, and in another instant was standing alone in the street, looking after the rapidly-retreating vehicle. "I seem cut out for adventures," he smiled to himself as he turned away and retraced his steps in order to find if anything could be seen of his friend in the crowd at the theatre; "but this is one which I have very little inclination to pursue."

Once among the crowd he found it no easy matter to get out of it again. The flames were rapidly dying down under the showering floods of the engines. The loss of life had not, after all, been so great as might have been expected, for every way of egress had been hastily opened,

and the members of the company themselves had escaped through the stage-door.

Many reports were spread as to the cause and origin of the fire, but the general belief was that the explosion arose from a spark falling on some detonating powder that had been required in one of the scenes. The explosion itself would have been of small consequence, but a quantity of light muslin had been carelessly tossed down by one of the numerous employés, and this had immediately caught fire and spread upwards until the whole of the stage was destroyed.

Having seen the fire extinguished and the crowd dispersed, Cecil lit a cigar and strolled back to his hotel. It was close upon midnight when he entered his rooms, and found Lord Danvers comfortably ensconced there, smoking.

He raised his eyebrows as Cecil walked in, but did not rise.

"How do you feel after that last quixotic enterprise?" he asked. "'Pon my word, Cis, you're the most extraordinary fellow I ever came across. Fancy rushing on to the stage, and dragging off a woman and disappearing down a trap-door before I even knew what was going

on! How *do* you get the steam up, my dear boy?"

Cecil laughed a little impatiently.

"You don't mean to say you'd have let the woman be burnt to death without making an effort to save her? Come, Danvers, you can't persuade me you're quite so cold-blooded as that."

"I don't mean to persuade you of anything, my dear fellow, except that I'm awfully hungry; and as I couldn't settle down till you came in, perhaps you'll be good enough to order supper now."

"Certainly. I'm glad to see you safe, Danvers. I was afraid you might have got crushed in the crowd. I was a long time looking out for you. I saw the last of the fire too. I'm afraid there's an awful lot of damage done."

"Very likely," was the answer, as the young lord rose and took his seat at the supper-table. "You've come in for some of it, I expect."

"I! How?"

"What did the rescued fair one say to you? Vowed eternal gratitude, of course, and—made an appointment."

"How the deuce do you know?"

"Easiest thing in the world, my dear fellow! Could a Frenchwoman and an actress resist such a temptation?"

"You seem to have a very poor opinion of actresses."

"Of the generality—yes," was the rejoinder; and Cecil saw the usual listless ironic expression of his face had changed to one of saddened thoughtfulness.

They had been friends for many years, these two, and yet Cecil Calverley knew that a veil of silence hung between them on one subject—a subject that neither could wholly avoid, and yet never dared discuss. The old restraint crept over him now as he looked at the delicate thoroughbred face before him; a face so apt to mislead an ordinary observer by its perfect impassiveness and sternly-suppressed feeling; a face which was too haughtily calm, too sternly grave for the years it had known, and yet could be so strangely gentle when once the mask was removed.

He was silent a long time—long enough for Cecil to finish his meal and hesitatingly ask him if he would not do the same. Then he rose

and impatiently pushed away the plate before him.

"Your pardon, old fellow. I am bad company, I know. Draw up your chair to the fire, and let us forget our troubles in smoke."

"I don't think I've any to forget," laughed Cecil, as he obeyed his companion's directions, and wheeled a small table with wines and liqueurs on it up to the fire.

"Lucky dog!" sighed Lord Danvers.

Both the young men now seated themselves, and proceeded to envelope their heads and faces in a cloud of aromatic vapour with the solemnity due to such an important ceremony.

The clock above them softly chimed; the soothing warmth and entire stillness of the room acted like a spell on their senses. It was an hour for comfort and confidence—an hour whose influence on the male sex is similar to that dressing-room *quart-d'heure* which women love, when maids are dismissed, and tresses released from the tortures of fashion, and dainty *robes-de-chambre* take the place of tight skirts and tighter bodices.

"Cis, old fellow," said Lord Danvers slowly,

at last, "tell me frankly, has this episode to-night made any impression on you?"

"Why do you ask?" said the young man in astonishment, raising his frank clear eyes to the face before him.

"For the simple reason most people do ask questions—because I want to know?"

"If you mean that I have fallen in love with Mdlle. Thé, or that her *beaux yeux* are haunting my present meditations—certainly not," laughed Cecil. "Love and I have still to make acquaintance. We have not even shaken hands yet."

"A pity you can't be strangers always," was the moody retort. "A man in love is the most helpless fool on all this earth, and the most miserable!"

"Danvers!"

"Yes. You may well look astonished. You never thought to hear me say such words. My dear boy, there is a page in my life dark enough to make you take warning from me. God knows if I could blot it out I would, but I cannot!"

The cold colourless face was strangely moved, the firm lips trembled, and Cecil looked at him

in wondering silence, but yet with that perfect sympathy in his eyes that had dated from the days of their boyish friendship at Eton, had lived on through separation, absence, worldly calls, and fashionable duties.

"Don't speak of it, dear old fellow," said Cecil heartily. "What matters the past, be it wrong or right, while we still have the future to amend it!"

"A wrong done can never be amended, Cis," said his friend sorrowfully. "If it could, I would pray to live as once I prayed to die, as I often pray now when the old sorrow comes fresh and keen as ever to my heart. It has come so to-night."

"Why to-night?"

"That woman's face brought it back. To you, Cis, she was only an actress; to me she was the sister of the only woman I ever loved, or ever shall love."

"The sister!" exclaimed Cecil in astonishment.

"Yes, the sister of Valerie d'Egmont. She was a beautiful woman when I saw her first—only four years ago, Cis—and she was the rage in Paris then. Her beauty helped her to success;

her pride marred her whole career. She was the wife of as thorough a blackguard as ever spoilt a woman's life; and he only valued her splendid talents, her queenly beauty, as means to his own selfish ends. She was of good family, but had been forced into marrying this brute, as most French girls are forced, from motives of convenience. He found out her talents, and insisted upon her going on the stage. Her splendid gifts, her unmistakable genius soon made her celebrated; but an actress's life is not a life for a proud, pure-minded, sensitive nature to live and thrive in, and it killed her. She was received in very good society when I made her acquaintance, and from that hour I loved her as madly and hopelessly as ever man loved. I did not know she was married at first; her husband was never with her, and she looked so young, so fragile, so girlish, it never entered my head to suppose her a wife. I found it out afterwards, but it was too late. My whole heart had gone out to her in that first meeting, and I could not take it back. Don't look at me so pityingly, Cis; it unnerves me, and the worst is yet to come. I don't know why I tell you this to-night;

perhaps it is to serve as a warning, though to the best of my knowledge Thé d'Egmont is not married, and not—proud."

Cecil was silent, save for that glance of sympathy and interest.

"Well," resumed Lord Danvers, "I saw her often; sometimes at her own house sometimes in society, and I can safely say I never won from her a word or look that could in any way encourage my mad folly. But it only made me worse. That very coldness and hauteur were as fuel to the flame. I longed to make her drop her icy mask. I longed to know that a woman's heart could beat and throb beneath that marble exterior. I longed to believe that, hopeless as my own passion was, it yet could move and touch her."

"Did you succeed?" asked Cecil gently, as he paused.

"Only too well. There was another admirer of hers, who rivalled me in idiotcy, but not in temerity. He was an old man, of high rank and notorious infamy—a man unscrupulous and powerful, whose influence was great, whose wealth greater. What network of infamy he wreathed

around her I cannot tell. I only know that poisoned whispers and mysterious scandals circulated through the circles she had so long adorned, that one by one her women friends forsook her, and the men grew less respectful in her presence, more boastful out of it. The proud, beautiful woman, who had held her own so royally, whose mind and heart were pure as a child's, was classed among the sisterhood of vice and shame; and he, the man whose name and honour she had kept so faithfully, was the first to credit the reports of evil and forsake her."

„The craven hound!" muttered Cecil, clenching his strong young fist in honest indignation at the picture those words represented—the picture of the lovely woman hunted down by calumny, forsaken by friends, deserted even by the man whose lawful duty it was to protect and shield her.

"You may well say that," said Lord Danvers. "It would have fared ill with him if I had come across him then; it will fare a thousand times worse if I ever come across him now!"

His face was very dark, his voice very grave, as he resumed his story.

"It seems to me that there are men to whom a wife's honour is naught; perhaps because they have so utterly forgotten their own. In any case this man left her to bear, as best she could, the unmerited opprobrium of the world, whose idol she had ever been; and it was then, Cecil—then, in my great intense pity and my just indignation—that I for once dropped the veil and bared my long-hidden feelings to her eyes; then that I lost prudence, judgment, self-control, and besought her to make herself what the world believed her to be."

"And her answer?"

"She did not scorn me, upbraid me, as she might justly have done; she—how well I remember it now, to this hour!—she only raised a white sad face from her hands and said these words:

"'Have I fallen so low as this?'

"Cecil, I felt choked, ashamed, stunned—so high above me she stood in her simple purity, so low beneath her I lay in my selfish passion. For a moment neither of us spoke. Then she rose and gently bade me follow her. She led the way up the softly-carpeted staircase to a suite

of rooms I had never entered. In one stood a tiny cot; lace and azure hangings closed it round. She beckoned me to approach, and, drawing back the curtains, she showed me the fairest sight I think I ever beheld. Two tiny infants lay sleeping there. Their faces were exactly alike; the gold, flossy curls framed in their delicate beauty, and long dark lashes rested on their cheeks. I looked at them in astonishment. Then she closed the curtains, and said very gently:

"'Their father is my husband. A wife *may* forget her duty; a mother—never!'

"I give you my word, Cecil, I could have knelt at her feet and cried like a child at that moment. I had loved her with a boy's unreasoning passion when I sought her side that night; I left her with a man's most perfect reverence and respect. It is the old story, Cis, of lives that met too late; but if I know anything of myself, I know this—that I shall never love living woman again, though my years reach twice the allotted span of human life!"

"And her fate?" asked Cecil gently.

"It is that which has brought me to Paris

now," was the calm reply; and as he spoke he drew a letter from his breast. "This reached me a few days ago when I was in the Tyrol. It had been long delayed, owing to the constant changes of my address. It contains her last words, Cis; it leaves me a charge I would have come from the world's end to undertake—the charge of her children, the little twin girls she showed me on that memorable night I last saw her. It appears from this that her husband is dead; her only living relation is her sister, who has now gone on the stage, and whom, on that account solely, she dare not entrust with the welfare and bringing up of her daughters. She beseeches me, by the memory of that sad and pain-filled past, to look after the poor forsaken little creatures, and leaves me all her small fortune in charge for them. They are at present under the care of a peasant woman in Alsace—their foster-mother and nurse, with whom Valerie lived after her husband's desertion. So it comes, Cis, that I am in Paris (where you stumbled across me yesterday); and so it comes that I felt strangely interested in your adventure with Thé

d'Egmont. God preserve you, dear old fellow, from any such pain and sorrow as my acquaintance with her sister has given me."

Cecil drew a long breath at the conclusion of his friend's story. "It is quite a romance," he said; "like one of those chains of incidents and circumstances that unroll themselves in modern novels. It is little use to say I am sorry for you, Danvers; words go for so little in a case like this. But I do thank you for your confidence, and I do feel for your grief now."

Their hands met in a long silent clasp, and then with no more words they parted for the night, and went slowly up to their respective rooms.

But when Cecil was fast asleep, and dreaming the happy dreams of youth and carelessness, his friend still sat with his head resting on his hands and his eyes fixed on the fragment of paper that had brought him the last dying words of the woman he loved.

"To think that all that time she loved me!" he muttered to himself. "All that time, and I never knew it. To think that she has lived in

penury and wretchedness, and died broken-hearted. My poor love!"

He raised his head impatiently, and paced to and fro with restless steps. Life had given him so many great and precious gifts; his name had the patent of nobility and the weight of wealth; his years were still so young; his powers and talents so great, and yet——

Ah, that *yet!* It has stood between mortals and the mirage of a happiness they never gain, since the sin of woman first brought its curse upon this weary earth.

CHAPTER III.

"OF MANY A CREED."

By many a name—of many a creed
We have called upon them!

THE Hon. Cecil Calverley was the second son of the Earl of Strathavon.

They were a very old and very noble family, who had come over with William the Norman, and held large estates and princely fortunes, and lived with the state and luxury of princes, utterly regardless of debts incurred or of ruin in prospect. A race reckless and prodigal, as many a noble and haughty English race are, with a wonderful magnificence in the routine of their daily life, and a profuse prodigality that slowly but surely pointed to one end. The eldest son was the idol of his father, now an old enfeebled man of some seventy years. Cecil was no favourite of the old lord's. For one thing he was utterly

different to either of his brothers. He studied the canons of art, not the rules of society; thought horses not worthy of comparison with books; neither betted at racecourses nor gambled at Kursaals; had taken high honours at Cambridge instead of incurring heavy debts; preferred claret to champagne, and water to either; refused to smoke, because he saw no good in making a chimney of one's mouth, and considered the habit uncleanly; had his rooms furnished with quatrocento chairs and rare bronzes, and hung with mezzotint prints instead of cup favourites, and old deep-hued paintings instead of ballet-dancers, and loved the gleam of marble statues and the glow of summer flowers better than the meretricious charms of azure and rose-coloured satins and gilded upholstery of modern fashion.

A strange young man, people thought. His tastes so odd, his views so strong, and his mind so firm that none could shake it in a determination once formed, it was little wonder that his father could not "get on with him," as he said; little wonder that his brothers so often mocked and ridiculed his ways, views, and opinions.

Two things possessed his mind—a passionate love, which almost amounted to adoration, for art; and a feverish unrest, which led him to wander hither and thither, from country to country, and city to city, as the fancy seized him.

He had one friend—Lord Danvers, a direct contrast to himself, as somehow one's greatest friends so often are—a lazy, good-tempered, languid-looking man, who was wildly extravagant, and had all the fashionable vices which Cecil had not, and yet was dearer to his heart than any other living being, saving perhaps his own young brother Harcourt.

Lord Danvers, who was the only son of the Marquis of Clevedon, had been at Eton and the University at the head of one of the fastest sets when Cecil was a mere boy; had afterwards entered the Guards, and left it in some half-dozen years because he complained "he had exhausted all the excitement, and the dressing was such a bore, and there was so little use in making love to ladies-in-waiting on Drawing-room days, when one woman was just like another."

He held matrimony in great horror, doubtless

because he was known to be such a great "catch" that dowagers and fortune-hunters never let him rest in peace; and he confided to his friends that his life was made a terror to him by the overhanging dread that, despite all his care, someone would manage to marry him one day. Yet, despite languor, and affectation, and wildness, there was sterling stuff in him, otherwise Cecil Calverley would never have cared for him so much as he did.

With all Cecil's peculiar views, as most men termed them, he was in no way intolerant of those who held different opinions or indulged in different habits. Though cigar and pipe rarely touched his own lips, he never objected to sitting in a smoking-room, and joining in laugh, or jest, or anecdote, even though the air was heavily weighted with pungent odours, and his eyes were half blinded with the fog of tobacco-smoke, and his ears rather bored by the incessant chatter of betting; and he did consider in his own mind that "Take the field bar one," "A cross on the old strain," "Fastest thing I ever did; found and killed in barely three-quarters," "What do you think of Charlie's shoulders?" "Lost a

monkey on Dogstar," "Won a clear two thou' on Ranger," and such-like odds and ends of conversation were not of the most interesting or intellectual description; but then Cecil was always so odd.

Another of his peculiarities was, that although his family were strict Roman Catholics, he had, from the age of fourteen, strenuously refused to follow the doctrines of that church, or give any obedience to its priestly authorities. This resolution and defiance of all precedent in one of the Strathavon race and blood made him an object of dislike to many of the zealous fraternity of Holy Mother Church, and gave rise to many involuntary thanksgivings that the wilful young heretic was not the heir. But though Cecil had shaken off the trammels of one religion, he seemed in no haste to adopt another. A faith once disturbed is the hardest of all to satisfy, and he sought through the doctrines of Mohammedans, Jews, Hindoos, Sagas, Atheists, Pantheists, Greeks, and Protestants, without having in any case discovered a satisfactory anchorage for his troubled soul to rest in.

"If only there were no creeds!" he sighed

one day to his *fidus achates*, after a lengthy and troubled discussion on some vexed point of doctrine.

"What would you have, then?" asked Lord Danvers.

"An universal tolerance, and a simple faith in the one Supreme Being—that is enough."

"For the believer, yes—but what for priests and pontiffs—would you abolish them?"

"Most decidedly. It is they who do all the mischief, turning religion into a mass of forms, legends, symbolism—veiling the Deity with unapproachable awe—making themselves mediators between man and his Creator—teaching us that the Word as they interpret or preach it is best for our understandings, and giving outward and visible shape to what is really pure and impalpable, a sacredness for the soul to feel, not a symbolism for the body to worship."

Holding views so opposed to the long-held standards of his family, and so contrary to priestly dictation, it was little wonder that Cecil was an object of suspicion and dislike to both. Yet he cared, or seemed to care, but little. Beside his passion for art and his love of freedom, all other

things looked mean and contemptible and of small account. His sunny, genial temperament had been sorely tried by stern discipline at home and much mockery and ridicule abroad.

Both had had but one effect. They made him more reserved and self-contained than his youth seemed to warrant, but they in no wise altered his opinions or changed his belief. The love he would have lavished on his home circle had been checked and repressed even in childhood, but it made him none the less tolerant in his feelings for others—none the less faithful in friendship—generous in trust.

Père Jerome, who was private confessor at Strathavon Castle, and officiated at grand ceremonials in the noble Gothic-built chapel, and had his own private apartments, and came and went as he wished, with none to question him, and fared sumptuously and richly with little trouble, though with infinite benefit to himself, this priestly divine held the second son of the family he served in extreme abhorrence.

How could it be otherwise, when he was a heretic and a scoffer and a thorough disbeliever in all religious observances, and called a high

mass arrant nonsense, and asked, even when quite a child, whether prayers said in a garment with a red cross on it were more acceptable to God than those said when the same article of attire was decorated with gold or broidered with purple, or left off altogether. "What could be said of such a boy or expected of his future?" asked the saintly confessor in righteous indignation. Had he not also views utterly unheard of with regard to confession, which he called an impious and degrading practice, and utterly without justification from biblical authority—a doctrine taught and encouraged by the Church of Rome for the sole purpose of rearing her converts and disciples in abject submission to her authority and credulous obedience to the will of her priests!

Père Jerome, in the sanctity of his velvet-hung, chastely-decorated little chamber, said and thought many a fierce and vindictive thing of this reprobate branch of a goodly tree; yet he was never in any way discourteous to him. He knew better than to exchange a silken glove for a steel gauntlet, and deemed affability and gentleness surer ministers of craft than harsh denunciation or outspoken rage. So he said, being

a wise man in his generation, and having many saintly and noble examples to follow.

In his own heart he knew that he would a thousand times sooner have seen young Cecil wild, reckless, profligate, than what he was. He had absolutely no vice which priestcraft could turn to account. The impoverished fortunes of his family suffered little at his hands; gambling he abhorred; extravagance he avoided; to women he was utterly indifferent, seeing always in paintings and statuary a loveliness far beyond ballroom flippancy and modern artifice and fashionable unreality and unfashionable vulgarism. So dreaming his own dreams, building up his own theories, living his own life contentedly, Cecil was alike careless of the ridicule he aroused or the anger he provoked.

Père Jerome, however, with his Jesuitical policy and his relentless heart, neither forgot nor forgave the rash boy who had opposed his doctrines in youth and spurned his authority in manhood. The other members of the family treated this eccentric second son as a person to be ridiculed or pitied—but of small account either way. Not so the priest. He knew that but two

lives—one old and feeble, the other mad and reckless—lay between Cecil and the power that had so long lain in the hands of himself and his predecessors. At any moment the law of Nature or the curse of accident might place him at the head as the holder of the family honours, and vested with lawful right to do what he chose.

Père Jerome knew instinctively that that right would make him of small account in the eyes of a man too keen-sighted to be a tool, and yet too indifferent to declare himself an enemy.

His mind was busied with such thoughts as these one morning, when he obeyed a summons to visit the Earl in his private apartments.

As he entered the aged man rose and bent before him with a courtly grace still his own, despite a weight of years and a frame ravaged by bodily pain.

"You sent for me, my son?"

The suave, courteous tones betrayed no curiosity, although the mind of the speaker was full of surprise at the unwonted summons.

"I sent for you, father; yes. Be seated, I pray."

A momentary pause ensued. Then the Earl spoke.

"I have received a communication from abroad that has somewhat puzzled me. It is in an unknown handwriting, and states that my son Cecil has placed a child at a certain conventual home in the south of France; that he has charged himself with its maintenance and support; that he insists on having free access to it at all times when inclination prompts; that his statements as to when and how he discovered it are of the vaguest, though his interest and concern respecting its welfare are quite singular in their disinterestedness. What do you think of this?"

A slight smile curled the lips of the attentive priest.

"Think? Why, that it shows that Mr. Cecil is, after all, but human. There is more hope for him when he takes to committing peccadilloes, instead of preaching against them."

"Then you are of opinion——"

"That he is no better than the rest of his sex, my lord."

"But surely you don't suppose that he has been fool enough to foist a bastard on the care

of these people, and charge himself with its future——"

"He may have married. There are pretty *paysannes* enough in the sunny land where he has so long wandered."

"Now, by all the saints of Heaven!" shouted the old man fiercely, "if I thought that I would disown him on the spot! A *mésalliance* in our family is a thing unknown."

"Mr. Cecil is unlike your family in most things —singularly unlike."

"For God's sake, don't insinuate that horrible doubt again!" cried the old man, with a sudden pitiful pleading in his voice. "You know what it has cost me all these years. You know how it has sapped all youth and vigour from my heart since first I listened to its poisoned whispers. I have wooed so many; but *she* alone of all the world I—*loved!*"

He spoke of his wife—the fair young bride he had worshipped in his fiery impulsive manhood. The woman who had sat at his board, and ruled his house, and borne his sons; and yet, despite all her gentleness and all his devotion, had ever been so cold, and passionless, and sad. Yet never a doubt

of her truth nor a suspicion of her fidelity had crossed his mind till the first tiny seed, dropped by a careless word of Père Jerome's, had taken root and borne a whole poisonous harvest with a rapidity as startling as it was terrible.

None knew of it save himself and the counsellor to whom he unveiled all the inmost secrets of his life, and bared the depths of his tortured heart; and he—because it so well suited his ends and so gradually shaped itself to his purposes—*he* soothed but to inflame, and calmed but to encourage.

"Do not excite yourself, my lord," he said gently; "it is unadvisable in your present state of health. I regret that I ever drew your attention to a fact which had long been plain to my own eyes. Think of it no more. After all, he is not your heir."

"Thank heaven, no! If only Malden would marry and put an end to all my fears touching the succession. A——"

"It is a pity Mr. Cecil has none of the soldier-blood of his race," insinuated the priest; "otherwise there is such a field for glory in foreign service."

The old man looked at him with a grim smile.

"You will surely wear the Red Hat ere you die, holy father. How skilfully you play with words! One would hardly dream that your sentence conveys an easy and unexceptionable method of getting rid of an obnoxious interloper!"

A dusky red coloured the clear olive of the priest's smooth cheek. He waved his delicate white hand with a Frenchman's expressive grace.

"Nay, my lord; I merely think it a pity that one of your blood should waste time in trifling with art, and spend more money on secret intrigues than either of his brothers do in open day."

The old Earl's face clouded. His eyes flashed fire.

"Tell me what you know!" he said sternly.

"He is a contumacious son of the Holy Church; nevertheless, I would we could lead him back to the fold," said Père Jerome, with unctuous, silken voice. "I met him in France last autumn, roaming through the woods of R——, with a knapsack strapped to his back and a child in his arms."

"A child! Why did you not tell me?"

The priest shrugged his shoulders.

"My lord, in our office we see and hear much. We say little."

"What did he say to you?"

"He told me a romantic story of having found a child in the woods, and of his intention to protect and adopt it. I thought the resolve singular, but then, Mr. Cecil——"

He paused, and looked meaningly at his companion.

"Yes, yes; I know," said the old lord impatiently. "Quixotism incarnate! So you knew the story, and never told me. I suppose someone from the convent has written this?"

He pointed to the letter, but his eyes rested searchingly on the smooth handsome face before him. It neither changed nor moved beneath his scrutiny.

"Doubtless," he said calmly; then added with a musing gravity: "It is strange that, with his horror for the Church and everything pertaining to it, he should have chosen such a refuge for his—I mean—the child."

The old Earl laughed his caustic, bitter laugh.

"He is unstable as the winds; he has no settled doctrine or belief. He may, as like as

not, veer round again, and be as staunch a zealot as—*yourself*, holy father."

The sneer touched the priest, despite his impassive appearance.

"I would such a day might dawn," he said gently, and veiling skilfully the anger he felt. "How gladly would our blessed Church welcome back again the return of so erring a son."

"I would gladly vest all paternal rights in Mother Church; she, at least, can claim her sons for her own. If we only knew as much!"

"Stay, my son; do not seek for cause to embitter you against this hapless youth. Even if his mother did wed you while her heart was given to another, at least you may be sure one so gentle and so pure could never have erred. Your honour was in safe keeping."

"Peace!" cried the old man fiercely, while the habitual saturnine gloom deepened on his face and his hands shook as with palsy. "Whatever she was, she is dead; and I—I loved her."

The fierce self-torture of a jealous nature reigned in his heart, and maddened him with suspicions that nothing could set at rest, for she whose holy purity he shamed by doubts could

neither answer nor assuage them. These feelings had coloured his whole conduct towards his son ever since his boyhood—ever since the horrible suspicion had first been breathed to him that, though Cecil was so unlike any of the Strathavon race, he strongly resembled a distant relation of his mother's house, to whom her heart had been given long ere the Earl had made her his wife.

There was no ground for such jealousy or doubt, and the old Earl was both proud and just; but, nevertheless, the seed, fostered and nourished by continual hints, grew into a rank and poisonous plant, whose roots turned his best feelings into bitterness, and implanted in his heart a fierce and unnatural dislike to his innocent son.

"What does your lordship intend to do in this matter?" asked Father Jerome, after a somewhat lengthy silence.

"Do? Nothing," said the Earl, rousing himself from his gloomy abstraction. "What is it to me if Cecil choose to adopt twenty beggars and bring them up? As for its being his own, that I don't quite believe. Whatever his faults,

that of loving women, is singularly remarkable by its absence."

The priest bit his lip. The game was not turning out quite as he wished.

"No; I don't think he would err in *that* way. He would think it more meritorious a thousand times to marry a peasant than betray one."

"And when he does *that* he has seen the last of me," said the old Earl with grim satisfaction. "I cast him off for ever."

"Have you the power, my lord?"

"I will *make* it!"

For a moment there flashed into his eyes the old untamed spirit which had fired his race in many a terrible conflict—in many a bloody war; arrogant, cruel, indomitable as the will that gave utterance to the words. He who heard them smiled quietly and gently to himself.

In his heart he prayed that the power might soon be put into execution—in his heart, too, he resolved that no means should be left untried to draw the despised son into the net he himself was forming for his heedless feet.

CHAPTER IV.

"ASK THE WORLD WHO I AM."

Weaving the web of days that wove
Your doom, Faustine.

"You will come with me to call on Mdlle. D'Egmont?" said Lord Danvers to his friend the morning after the fire, as they met at breakfast.

Cecil looked rather disconcerted. "I would much rather not," he said reluctantly; "I shall only be in the way of your conversation. No; do go by yourself, Vere; I will await the issue of the interview here."

"In the way—nonsense!" laughed Lord Danvers. "No, no; you must come. Besides, you owe the lady a visit after her invitation and your gallant services. You are not bashful surely, Cis?"

"Hardly likely, at my age. Nevertheless, I do feel a strange reluctance to pursuing my

acquaintance with Mdlle. D'Egmont. I wish you would yield to my wishes for once."

"My dear fellow, presentiments and prejudices are a mistake—the influence either of indigestion or too much wine. I have set my mind on your coming, so be rational and do what I ask."

"Of course, if you make such a strong point of it, I must obey," laughed Cecil, rising from his seat. "I know of old that I come off second best when arguing against your persuasions."

But when, a short time afterwards, he found himself in the dainty perfumed boudoir of the beautiful actress, he forgot all about prejudices and presentiments in a feeling of genuine admiration for the woman who greeted him with such flattering and self-evident pleasure.

"You must allow me to introduce my friend, Lord Danvers," said Cecil presently. "He has called upon you on a matter of some importance."

Mdlle. D'Egmont looked up in surprise, and met the cold calm gaze fixed upon her.

"I am quite at your service, monsieur," she said, in the clear sweet tones of a voice trained to express every shade of emotion, every note in the gamut of human feeling and human passions.

"Permit me first to inquire whether you have quite recovered from the alarm you experienced last night?" said Lord Danvers. "What a terrible thing that fire was!"

"Yes," she said, with a shudder, as the memory of the scene flashed across her. "Ah, monsieur" —and she turned once more to Cecil—"but for you, what might not have been my fate! I have not ceased to think of your bravery; but I feel I can never speak my gratitude sufficiently."

"Pray do not mention the subject any more," said the young man, colouring hotly at her words. "I did no more than any other man would have done in my place. I am glad I happened to be so near the stage, that is all."

He glanced entreatingly at Lord Danvers, as if asking him to interpose now between the actress's gratitude and his own reluctant acceptance of it. His friend was not slow to take the hint.

"Madame," he said, "in order not to trespass any longer on time which must be so valuable, allow me to acquaint you with the business that brings me here. In the first place, will you kindly read this letter?"

"From Valerie! This is her handwriting," exclaimed Mdlle. D'Egmont in surprise. "Did you, then, know my poor sister, monsieur?"

"Yes—many years ago," he answered sadly.

Mdlle. D'Egmont's eyes ran rapidly over the sheet of paper in her hand. Then she uttered a hasty exclamation.

"Guardian of her children!—but that is impossible!"

She turned back and looked at the date of the letter.

"Ah, this was written long ago, I see! My poor sister! She little knew that she was in error believing her husband to be dead. It was his friend and villainous associate, Paul Leroux, who was killed at San Francisco. Gaspard Ducroix still lives. He was here in Paris in the autumn."

Lord Danvers' face grew troubled at her words. "And the children?" he asked.

"They are with their father, I believe. He insisted on knowing where they were, and I had no resource but to give him the address in Alsace. I begged him to write and tell me of their welfare, but I have heard nothing."

"How long ago was this?"

"About four months, I think. It was late in the autumn, I know; and soon after I had a letter from Manon Bris, their foster-mother, saying the little ones had been removed from her care by their father."

"He was scarcely the sort of man to burden himself with two young helpless children, I should imagine," remarked Lord Danvers thoughtfully. "Poor little things! I dread to think of them in the power of such a scoundrel. He is nothing better; even you, mademoiselle, must acknowledge that!"

"I cannot deny it," she said sadly. "My poor sister's life was only one of long suffering and torture, yet even to me she never blamed him; she did her duty nobly and faithfully to the last!"

A rush of tears blinded her for a moment; hence she did not notice how pale the bronzed grave face before her grew at her words, nor how the firm lips trembled as he turned hurriedly away.

Cecil came to the rescue then.

"It is a sad story, mademoiselle," he said

gently; "but your sister has left a noble example of womanly fortitude and endurance, and let us hope she is happier now!"

The beautiful woman dashed the tears from her eyes and struggled for composure. "She had need be," she said at last, "if there is any truth in the law of compensation."

"I fear, then, I can do nothing in the matter now," said Lord Danvers, joining abruptly in the conversation. "Of course the father is their lawful guardian. At best I can but watch over their interests from a distance. If it ever lies in my power to assist or aid them I shall never hesitate. And now, Mdlle. D'Egmont, as a last favour, will you give me the address of this nurse in Alsace—what is her name?"

"Manon Bris. Certainly, monsieur; I will give you her letter, if you like. It contains some account of my poor Valerie's life during those last sad months, when even I knew little of her illness or her grief."

She moved away to an escritoire at the farther end of the room as she finished speaking, and presently returned with a letter in her hand.

"It is written by a village priest," she said,

as she gave it to Lord Danvers. "It will give you the particulars of this *lawful* abduction, and you can follow up the clue at your own leisure. I need hardly say that any news respecting my little nieces will be very welcome to me."

"Be assured you shall have it when in my power to give," answered Lord Danvers, as he put the letter in his pocket-book. "And now, mademoiselle, accept my thanks for your kindness in entrusting me with this mission, and permit us to say adieu! I fear we have trespassed too long already on your valuable time."

"Not at all," she said with a smile. "I fear that I shall have more at my disposal than I shall know how to while away. The destruction of the theatre will of course put an end to the performances at present."

"Do you always act in opéra bouffe?" inquired Cecil.

"No," she answered, a sudden flush of colour springing to her face. "I prefer comedy; but suitable engagements are not always to be had, and one must often take what one can get, not what one likes."

"Yet, for Art's sake, is it not best to be true to oneself?"

"Ah, monsieur," said the beautiful actress with a faint sigh, "words like those are easy—for a man. A woman who stands alone in the world, and has to fight her battles single-handed, has as little chance of being true to herself as she has of gaining the world's sympathy or—its credence."

"I should scarcely imagine the world had dealt hardly with you, mademoiselle," said Cecil gravely.

Again that deep pained flush rose to her brow; her eyes fell.

"Perhaps not, in a certain sense," she answered. "But I cannot explain, monsieur, and you cannot judge."

Lord Danvers had moved away, and was deeply engrossed in the study of a delicately-finished engraving on the wall. The actress glanced hurriedly at him, then her eyes turned to the handsome frank young face beside her.

"Have you been long in Paris, monsieur?" she asked; and it seemed to Cecil Calverley that her voice was less certain in its ring—more tremulous in its soft sweet tones.

"I have but just arrived," he answered, a little surprised by the abrupt question.

"And—pardon my curiosity—did you come to the theatre last night to see me or the piece?"

"Well, to speak the honest truth," laughed Cecil, "we went from no motive at all. We saw the crowd, and went in with it. I have been a stranger to Paris so long, mademoiselle, that your fame had not yet reached me."

"I am glad of that," she exclaimed eagerly, a look of relief passing over her expressive face. "Monsieur, I owe you my life. I can never hope to repay the debt, and to thank you I can find no words; but I fear a day may come when you will think that a life so worthless but little merited the perils you braved. Yet, even in that day, believe my gratitude will never be less, nor my memory of you unfaithful. These are only words—idle words, you may deem; but some day you will know why I spoke them, why I am glad that we met as strangers."

"To part as friends, I trust," said Cecil gallantly, a little puzzled by her agitated manner. "And to meet——"

"To meet! Ah, perhaps, no more!" she

answered. "Even though between us lies the tie of a rescued life—the deathless memory of a bravely-earned gratitude."

"Pray forget my service. It does not merit such praise or such remembrance. As for meeting no more, that, I trust, will not be the case. But if it be too great an honour to be admitted to the circle of your friends, I shall still follow your course with vivid interest. The profession you grace is, fortunately for me, one which can never let my memory be as faithless as you seem to imagine."

She made no answer; only held out her hand in silence, and looked at him with eyes strangely soft and sad.

"Adieu, mademoiselle," said the young Englishman, bending low over the fair white hand, extended so graciously. "And will you not retract your words? 'No more' seems such a cruel decree after to-day."

"It will not seem cruel to you long," she answered, all the warmth and softness of her face gone now, and replaced by a cold and cynical smile. "Ask the world who I am before you couple my name with that of friendship. And now, once more, adieu."

There was no gainsaying that firm dismissal. With her strange words still ringing in his ears, Cecil Calverley found himself in the street once more, and, turning abruptly to Lord Danvers, he demanded:

"Who is this Mdlle. D'Egmont? Do you know anything of her?"

"No," answered his friend in surprise. "But I can soon learn. The Count de Besançon is coming to dine with us to-night. He is perfectly *au fait* with every Paris scandal, and acquainted with every notoriety. We will ask him about her if you desire it."

"Yes, I do. Something she said has puzzled me exceedingly."

"Don't lose your heart to her," said Lord Danvers jestingly. "She certainly is most beautiful, and her gratitude to yourself was displayed very touchingly. Still——"

"Don't be a fool, Danvers," broke in Cecil with an anger and impatience that were born of his own uncomfortable feelings and vague suspicions. "Lose my heart!—I?"

"With what superb disdain you say that," laughed his friend. "And are you to be the

only invulnerable target for the shafts of the little blind god?"

Cecil shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose I shall meet my fate some day, like everyone else," he answered with good-humoured contempt. "But may the powers that be keep *that* day far off! I have no desire to make its acquaintance."

After dinner that night, in the fashionable café where the three men met, Lord Danvers put the question to the Count de Besançon which Cecil had been longing yet dreading to hear. Their guest was a middle-aged Frenchman, courteous, witty, well-informed—a man whose life had been somewhat reckless, yet whose vices had never been too pronounced, even as his virtues had been ever laughingly gainsayed.

"Thé d'Egmont, the actress!" he exclaimed, as Lord Danvers' question arrested him in the act of pouring some brandy into his cup of *café noir*. "Know her? Well, not personally; though it is as much as my reputation is worth to acknowledge so humiliating a fact. Only she is not called by the name you mention in Paris. Surely, you have heard of—Faustine?"

CHAPTER V.

"BE THOU CHASTE AS ICE, PURE AS SNOW, THOU SHALT NOT ESCAPE CALUMNY."

A MOMENTARY silence followed Count Besançon's words. It was broken by Lord Danvers. "I must confess my ignorance," he said, "I have been abroad so long that I am unacquainted with the celebrities of *les deux mondes de Paris*. I suppose, though, there is not much doubt as to which of them the lady in question belongs."

Cecil's face changed. The Count laughed good-humouredly. "Doubt? Well, hardly, I should say. Her beauty, her coquetries, her extravagances, have been the talk of all Paris. The burning of this theatre will but add fresh laurels to her fame. Her own narrow escape and the fear that they might have lost their idol will make people rush after her more than ever."

"Has she been on the stage long?"

"She came out about a twelvemonth ago, then took a freak into her head and refused to act. Gave out she was ill, and used to drive in the Bois every day, out of bravado. She is a perfect incarnation of caprice, and as uncertain as the winds of heaven."

"And how did she gain so ominous a pseudonym?" inquired Lord Danvers. Cecil was quietly listening to the conversation, and made no attempt to join in it.

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. "An artist painted her—it was a strange picture. Created a *furore* in the *salon*. She insisted on his calling it that, and most people have given her the title ever since."

"And she lives up to the character?"

"I cannot say that. It is the strangest thing the way that woman plays fast and loose with her reputation, and yet—well, I have heard many a man declare that she is innocent with it all. Her name has never been coupled with any other. With all her follies and extravagances there are plenty who believe in her—numbers who adore her. She is a mystery in fact, and one whose meaning is not to be easily elucidated."

"A strange account, indeed," remarked Lord Danvers thoughtfully. He remembered Valerie, and what the world had said of her. How few save himself had had any belief in her purity—any respect for her womanhood! Was her sister to suffer in like manner? "She is very beautiful," he remarked presently.

"Take care, milord," laughed the Frenchman. "One would think you had also fallen a victim to her fascinations. I suppose you have seen her act?"

"Yes, and consider her talents wasted on the rubbish she performs."

"Many think so beside yourself. I, for my part, believe tragedy is her *forte*. You should hear her recite—*ma foi! c'est superbe, ça!*"

"If it were her *forte*, as you say," remarked Cecil Calverley, abruptly striking into the conversation, "she would surely never do herself the injustice of performing so inferior a *rôle* as the one we witnessed."

The Count shrugged his shoulders. "She is a woman—she is full of caprices—and she loves money. What pays best now? Burlesque and opéra bouffe. So she accepts them; besides, what

an opportunity for costume! You forget that. To a woman like the Faustine you could scarcely offer a greater inducement. All Paris went to see her as a water-lily."

"She is no actress then?"

"*Cela dépend.* What she chooses to do and what she *can* do are two very different things. But she has one great merit. Let her play what she may, be it ever so trivial a part, she can always forget *herself.* There are few who can do that now."

"True," said Lord Danvers. "Therein lies the only perfection of acting and its rarest achievements. Still I should think there was scarcely much scope for it in personating—a water-lily."

The Count laughed.

"You may not think so; the public did. After all, genius does not pay half so well as adaptability. Probably Faustine is wise in her generation, and knows this. She wanted to make herself the rage by one lightning stroke. She succeeded. She has gained all she desired. *Au reste,* she can please herself for the future. To become a great tragic actress is a slow, toilful, and wearisome life. For success—one slips into it easily enough by the open portals of opéra bouffe!"

"After all, it is the fault of the public," interposed Cecil Calverley. "Genius is thrown away nowadays. They want realism in every branch of art, and realism means only too often vulgarity. We shall have Venus painted next in real lace and diamonds."

"As Venus Victrix—emblematic of modern society," laughed Lord Danvers. "What is your opinion, Count? Have intelligence and taste entirely disappeared? And are we to have a fashion in art as well as in our houses and toilets?"

"And why not?" interrogated the Frenchman. "Would you have art always the same? All that is greatest and most glorious has been done. We shall never have another Michael Angelo, or Raphael, or Titian. Beethoven can own no rival; Shakespeare no equal; modern society is too frivolous for grandeur—too rapid for the slowly-ripening achievements of greatness; life is all rush and hurry-skurry now; novelty and excitement are the greatest charms that art, or literature, or the drama, can bring to their respective works."

"You are right, I believe, and your words apply to our nation equally well. Shakespeare

has found his rival in Offenbach, and I doubt if our greatest authors have met with half the success that attends a modern French novelist."

"Which brings us back to the same point. It is the fault of the age; the demand always creates the supply. If public taste has degenerated, our artists, and writers, and actors must give it what it craves, or starve. Even the sublimity of genius prefers a full platter to an empty one, I should imagine."

"That sounds horribly matter-of-fact," said Cecil. "It may be true, but it is painful all the same. One hates to think of great gifts wasted and talents squandered in pandering to the vulgar multitude. Art alone can ennoble the world; it should never sink to the degradation of encouraging human vices."

"When art has empty pockets it can scarcely be blamed for trying to fill them," remarked Lord Danvers. "You are still at the age of illusions, my dear Cecil. It is so easy to talk when you are not—hungry."

"I cannot believe the world so ungrateful as to ignore what is really meritorious."

"My dear boy, the world is generally in too

great a hurry to look below the surface of anything. Besides, it saves so much trouble to accept things as they are; not try to make them wiser, greater, better."

Cecil shook his head.

"We are not all fools surely," he said with contempt. "In no age, at no time, has education been of such paramount importance. Where are its benefits if vulgarity, indecency, and show are supposed to represent popular taste?"

"I am speaking of your country," remarked the Count de Besançon. "The very fact of educating people too severely tends to make them less critical as regards the amusements that fill their hours of relaxation."

"Well, there is something in that," laughed Lord Danvers. "But now we have drifted from the subject in question. Is Mdlle. Faustine answerable for this argument? I was going to ask you——"

"Pardon me, Danvers," interrupted Cecil somewhat haughtily. "As that lady's name has dropped out of our discussion, pray let it remain there. I feel no interest in the impure scandals that play with a woman's reputation."

Lord Danvers looked astonished. The Frenchman smiled.

"You are particular, monsieur," he said ironically. "A woman with the reputation of the Faustine must expect to be discussed in all classes of society. I should think it was not often either that she found a champion like yourself."

"My friend is very young," said Lord Danvers with an indulgent smile. "He thinks all women angels still. You and I, Count, as men of the world, are beyond such an idyllic belief; but, upon my soul, if we spoke truth, I believe we should say we envied him it."

"I believe you are right," answered his friend after a moment's pause. "Ah, youth—youth—how beautiful you are and how fleet! *Pardieu!* what would I not give to be young once more, and look at life with eyes of faith instead of disgust and disappointment!"

"How often I have heard that wish expressed," said Cecil Calverley. "I wonder when my time will come to echo it."

"Not for long, I hope," hurriedly muttered Lord Danvers.

"Not till you waste your heart on a woman

like—the Faustine," said the Count de Besançon with an odd little smile.

"Danvers," said Cecil, later on that evening, when their guest had left, and cards had been pushed aside and cigars taken the place of conversation, "I can't say I like your friend. He is not a married man, I suppose?"

"Oh yes he is."

"Then he ought to hold higher views of women, or more respectful. I felt disgusted with his conversation latterly."

"He is a Frenchman," said Lord Danvers dryly. "If you want a thorough good specimen of domestic bliss, my dear boy, study married life here. I have seen a good deal of it. The result is, I congratulate myself every day that I am—a bachelor."

"Don't be cynical, Danvers. If Valerie Ducroix had been Valerie d'Egmont, I doubt if you would have been able to boast of your freedom now."

A dark flush stained the young Englishman's face.

"Cecil," he said sternly, "as you value my friendship, never jest on that subject; it is the one thing I cannot stand."

"Pardon me," said Cecil hastily; "I did not mean to offend you. I should have respected your confidence better."

"You did not think I was so thin-skinned; nor am I on any other topic. But her name is too sacred for a jest, even between us."

"It must be an odd thing to care so awfully for one single human being!" remarked Cecil, musingly.

"Odd. You're right there. Unaccountable too. But we all do it sooner or later. Your turn will come, Cis!"

"I hope not," said the young man, shrugging his shoulders and laughing gaily. "I don't see why one shouldn't get on through life without a love affair. It has been done."

"I doubt it. It may have been denied; it is not in human nature to *do*."

"Danvers, don't be offended, but you really are the very last person in the world I should have suspected of caring deeply for a woman; least of all of keeping her memory in your heart for all these years."

"Aye, and I shall keep it for twice as many more. I met my fate, Cis, for the first time and the last."

"Do you not think it possible to love twice, then?"

"Possible?—oh yes; a dozen times for some men!"

"But not for yourself?"

"Thank God, no!" he exclaimed with startling earnestness. "I could never love any woman living, after *her*."

"What do you really think of the sister? Is she at all like——"

"Like Valerie, you would say. As a star is like the sun, as a weed is like the rose, yes."

Cecil laughed.

"She is a very beautiful woman, say what you like," he remarked presently, "and totally different to my ideas of an actress."

"In that respect I agree with you. I hope her sister's example will be her guide through the dark insidious paths her feet will have to tread."

"I hate a public career for a woman," exclaimed Cecil impatiently. "Authoresses, actresses, female artists, and female lecturers are a class of beings I detest. Heaven forfend I should ever marry any one of them!"

"The man who cries out loudest against a creed

is not always the one who refrains from following it," said Lord Danvers sententiously.

"You mean I might change my opinion?"

"I have known things more unlikely."

"Well, if I know anything of myself at all, I am quite sure I won't. Celebrity for a man is bad enough; for a woman it is simply detestable!"

"What extraordinary views, my dear boy! I can't say I, for one, agree with them. Fame is as the breath of life to most men. It is the mainspring of an artist's exertions, a musician's labours, a poet's dreams, a writer's perseverance. Without it as an incentive, genius would lose half its power, talent half its strength. If you choose to hide your light under a bushel, Cis, you are a singular exception; but even you must feel a thrill of pleasure when a certain unknown artist's paintings attract attention, invite criticism, or win praise. Confess it."

"I never read a critique, on my word of honour."

"What! so thin-skinned as all that?"

"No; my reasons are simple enough. If favourable, they might enervate me; if adverse,

they might discourage. I paint for painting's sake. I love it, and it is of little consequence what the outside world, whether of ignorance or culture, think of my work."

"Or of you?"

"Of me still less. That is one great fault of the fame you laud. It is not of his creations so much as of his own name, his own skill, his own powers, that the artist thinks; and that fact is deleterious to art, even as it is injurious to its professors."

"Again, I don't agree with you. Ambition is the soul of an artist's genius. Were he content to be unknown, to live and die forgotten, he would be immeasurably the worse. If he craves eminence for himself, it is only that the fruits of his fancy, the ideals of his brain, the grand and glorious truths he tries to teach, may be immortal."

"With *his* name attached to them?"

"I see no harm in that. The honour and praise of our fellow-men will not injure any of us unless we are too weak-minded to bear the breath of popularity. But I won't argue any more with you; let us return to the first subject

of discussion. I mean to go at once to Alsace. What do you do?"

"I will see you through your adventure, if possible. My time is my own still."

"Thanks. I shall be glad of your company. When do you intend to look after your little foundling again?"

"Well, I mustn't go too soon, I suppose, or the worthy Sœurs de Secours will be suspicious."

"Have you any idea where your friend the priest is now?"

"None whatever. I have often wondered what took him to France at that particular time."

"Business connected with his holy calling, you may be sure," said Lord Danvers, with a faint sneer. "Don't you believe it, Cis?"

"Not exactly. He is a Jesuitical spy, if there ever was one. In my own mind I believe he came to look after me and carry some of his sneaking reports back to my father."

"Phew—w—w!" whistled Lord Danvers, "does the wind blow that way? That little dish of charity which you concocted, my dear boy, will look well when served up at the parental board with a priestly garnishment."

Cecil laughed outright.

"You don't suppose my father would believe him if he concocted such a monstrous story as that! Why, it has not the slightest ground for probability. In fact, the child must have been four or five years of age, judging from her appearance."

"Were she ten, Père Jerome would weave a romance out of that *rencontre* in the wood. Believe me, Cecil, you have not heard the end of your adventure by a long way yet."

Cecil looked grave for a moment. "It is not like you to croak," he said. "Come what may, I shall look after this poor little forsaken thing as long as——"

"Ye both shall live," quoted Lord Danvers solemnly.

"For shame! To bring in the marriage service is rather too bad. It is a curious coincidence though, that we should both be saddled with other people's children at the same time."

"I wish I had a chance of being 'saddled,' as you call it, with my poor Valerie's little ones. I fear that brute of a father will stand in my way."

"From all accounts he ought to be only too glad to get rid of them."

"But not to me. We were sworn foes of old. It seems odd — doesn't it?—that a man should treat his wife as he did, and yet be jealous of her."

"There seems no accounting for the vagaries of the 'divine passion,'" laughed Cecil. "Thank heaven, I am free from them all as yet."

"You might thank heaven more if you were sure of remaining so," answered his friend grimly.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLUE LOST.

WITH the next day's noon the two friends found themselves at the address given them by Mdlle. D'Egmont.

It was a tranquil, fragrant little farmhouse with gardens full of budding fruit-trees, and climbing-roses trained around the porch, and the hum of bees, and the coo of doves, and the faint lowing of cattle from the pastures ever coming to the ear. It had all the beauty of sylvan solitude, all the freshness and fragrance of woodland life, and the cheery, pleasant-spoken woman who was its mistress looked every way in keeping with its homeliness and quiet beauty.

She answered their questions with extreme readiness. She told them of Valerie's long illness and gentle patience, of the little helpless

creatures she had left to her care, and whom she had taken to her own motherless breast with such tender love and care.

"They were to me as my own," she said, in the sweet singing voice that one hears so often among the French peasantry. "It seemed to me the Holy Mother had sent them in place of my own little one, who died just a little year ago, messieurs, and she (the sweet gracious lady!) told me to guard and love them for her sake —the little blessed angels—and never to part with them till some day a good kind friend of hers should come with a letter, authorising me to place them in his charge—a letter written by herself when she lay dying here. Well, messieurs, they stopped with me and were happy, very happy, though they sometimes wept for their mother—the saints preserve her! But they were too young to know what her loss really meant; and they played at my hearth, and were so sweet and fair and lovable and tender that I loved them more and more as days went by. Well, one day—it was getting late in the autumn then —a man came marching boldly up to my door and demanded his children. His! *Bon Dieu!*

I knew he was right. Had I not seen him in his grand Paris house when first my beautiful lady sent for me to take her babes? And she had told me he was dead long since. I knew not what to do—not then in my bewilderment —at first. Alas! he did not give me time to think for long. He seized upon all he could find—her few trinkets, her scanty possessions; and then he roughly bade me put together the children's clothes and bring them to him."

Here her voice broke into sobs, and for a time checked her narration. Cecil and his friend waited patiently till she was calmer, though Lord Danvers' heart sank more and more at this recital; and his hopes of ever rescuing the poor little motherless creatures grew fainter and farther each moment.

"Messieurs will kindly excuse my grief," the good peasant woman presently resumed, "when I think of the little beautiful darlings, how they clung to me and cried, and begged me not to give them to that stern-faced man. Ah, it was pitiable; but I had no help for it. He took them away then and there; and when I begged him to let me have some word of how they were

and where they went, he only said it was no business of mine and that I should never hear aught from him—he had other things to do than write to one like me. I thought my heart would break when I saw the little trembling things go so timidly and tearfully away. My eyes were blind with the tears I shed; but he—he only laughed. Ah, the barbarous heart of stone—what does it not deserve!"

"Have you heard nothing of them since?" asked Lord Danvers.

"Nothing, monsieur."

"And you do not know what he proposed doing—where he meant to take them?"

She shook her head sadly. "I have told monsieur all I know. I wish, for my sake, it was more."

"Which route did they take. Do you know?"

"The Paris road, monsieur. I understood he was to travel there by diligence. But he may have only said it, not meaning me to know whither he was bent. I cannot tell."

"You are sure he was their father—this man?"

"Sure! Holy Virgin, if only I could have

doubted it I should be a happy woman now. No, monsieur, it was indeed Monsieur Ducroix that came, alive and well and hearty as yourself."

"Curse him!" muttered Lord Danvers, with a fierce wrath in his voice and eyes that startled the woman as she heard. "The cowardly hound! so he stands in my way again. I wish our day of reckoning was at hand. It will be a bad one for him when it does arrive."

"You cannot interfere with a father's rights, Danvers," said Cecil gently. "Law is stronger than human feeling."

"If monsieur ever hears anything of the little angels, will he kindly tell me, their poor nurse?" asked the woman timidly. "If monsieur is the friend of whom my lady spoke, I am sure he will look after her poor helpless little ones for the sake of their sainted mother."

"That I will, depend on it," said Lord Danvers earnestly. "And now, Cecil, as we have learnt all we can, there is no use in remaining here any longer. I will follow up the clue, if possible, by ascertaining where this Ducroix went. A man and two children are not likely to pass through the country unnoticed."

"This amateur detective business promises to be exciting," said Cecil. "I am of your opinion, Danvers, it ought to be easy to trace them. Let us see if it can be done."

And having largely rewarded the faithful woman for her information, they bade her good-morning, and started off on the first stage of research.

CHAPTER VII.

"SOLD INTO BONDAGE."

In the public room of a wayside tavern, a black-browed gipsy-looking man was sitting, drinking. He had a box of wooden puppets by his side, and on the rude table at which he sat were the remains of his supper. A group of strolling actors were at the other end of the room hungrily discussing a huge dish of macaroni. Two handsome laughing girls sat on a bench, sharing a wine-cup between them. Two tiny children—girls—were crouching in a corner by the fire, weeping silently and sadly to themselves, and as little noticed by the other inmates of the room as were the dogs that slumbered at their feet.

Into the midst of this rough assemblage strode a man, carrying in his arms a child. He gave a

careless nod, and glanced around as if in search of someone.

"Where is Giacone?" he asked.

"He will be back presently," answered one of the girls. "Do you want him in such haste, amico?"

The man vouchsafed no answer; only loosed the scarlet wrapper from the child's little form, and roughly bade her join the group at the fire.

She crept to them timidly and shrinkingly, the little creatures making room for her directly, and looking with dim, wondering eyes at her delicate beauty, at the golden gleam of her long rich hair, and the satiny texture and peachlike bloom of her skin.

"Are you coming with us?" they asked her.

But she, not knowing the meaning of the liquid foreign words, only shook her graceful head, and looked at them with wide startled eyes, half frightened and half glad.

The man who had brought her threw himself down beside the others, and a good-tempered, dark-eyed woman brought him supper and set wine before him, as though he was an expected guest.

He ate but little, and that in utter silence, save for a motion of his hand towards the child and a hurried direction to the woman who served him to take her food also.

As he concluded his meal the door opened, and a man entered.

"Ah, Giacone!"

"What! are you here already? You must have travelled fast, friend," was the answer to his eager exclamation. "Have you supped?"

"Yes; and you?"

"Am ready to keep my bargain. Where is the child?"

The man pointed to the group by the fire, and the newcomer's fierce eyes brightened as they took in the wonderful fairylike grace of the little crouching figure.

"Can she dance?" he asked.

"Not yet; but sings like a nightingale, and is quick and apt to learn."

"That is well."

"What is it you need with the child?" demanded the other, speaking in French, so that those around could not understand.

"You need not fear I mean her any harm.

She shall be well cared for. I told you what I did with them long ago, amico—train them for the ballet. In this age there is constant demand for such articles. I prefer them young, they are so much less trouble; and I prefer them parentless, they are so much easier to manage. Now will you have the gold and sign the agreement?"

They went away together into an inner room and presently came out again.

"You will treat her kindly—you promise that," said the child's barterer as he stayed for an instant beside her.

"Have I not promised?"

"She is but a delicate little thing, not used to rough ways and words, you know."

"Do you repent your bargain, friend?"

"No—no. What could I do with a child——"

"Even your own——"

"How do you know that?" he said fiercely; "I told you I could find you such a one as you wanted, and I never believed the brat was my own."

"One of the disadvantages of possessing a beautiful wife, eh—friend?"

A dusky burning flush spread over the sombre evil-looking face.

"Silence!" he muttered roughly. "What do you know? We may not meet again for long; when we do, look to it that you have kept your word as regards *her*."

And he strode away through the crowd with no other word or look.

The man Giacone, or, as he was usually called, Già, bent down to the half-numbed child and took her up in his arms and sat her on the bench before him. She looked at him in terror, and her little frame trembled as his merciless glance took in all its grace and beauty.

"You'll do," he said roughly, in his own tongue. "A brave life's before you, little one. You shall be a dancing-dog for the nobles and princes of your own land. You will be handsome, that shows plain enough. Well, a woman's beauty is a mine of gold to herself. It won't be my fault if the training fails to fit you for the—race."

And with a low brutal laugh he summoned the woman and bade her take the children away and put them to bed.

"We have a long journey to-morrow," he said. "I go with them home!"

Home!

Had anyone there known what a mockery of that gentle word his lips had framed, they would have deemed it a truer kindness to stifle the life in their fragile childish bodies then and there, than to let them pass to the existence that waited them with the light of the morning sun!

"So Già is at his old tricks again," said the man with the puppets.

One of the girls looked quickly up. "He is not unkind to them—so they say," she answered; "and, after all, it is a fine life. The great dancers in the cities live like queens, and have jewels and beautiful clothes and carriages. I wish I were one—that I know."

The man laughed.

"True to your sex, Brunnotta, never content. You lead a merrier life than the dancing queens, believe me."

"How pretty that child was!" said the other girl thoughtfully. "The man who brought her was French, was he not?"

"Yes; I wonder how he came by her. She looked like a little lady."

"True; but that is no business of ours. Già knows what he is about."

Then they, too, went to their sleeping-rooms. Long before they were up next morning Già and the children had left.

A strange, cruel life was that which followed for the child given over to Già's care. Long wearisome hours of training when the little limbs were tired and aching; blows and oaths and cruel words that dazed her bewildered brain; scanty meals, and coarse food, and broken sleep from which she was roused and disturbed at the tyrant's whim; a sordid toilsome mechanical existence, that left the little fragile body numbed and insensible and utterly wearied of the life that was only a burden.

She had been nicknamed Quità by her new protector because he deemed her own name, Maraquita, too long and too fine, and she was known only by that among the wretched little beings whose misery she shared, and to the pale sad-faced woman, Già's wife, who used to tend the little forlorn creatures with a pitiful compassion that often brought punishment on herself, and whose nightly prayer to the saints was one of

intense thanksgiving that they had never granted her long-past wish to have a child of her own; and when a woman can be thankful for the withholding of *that* gift, her life must be one of two things—utterly vile, or utterly wretched.

The woman Lisa was often black and blue with bruises, and hungered for want of food, and wearied with long toil, and yet she was gentle and uncomplaining, and did her best to shield the little parentless fledglings who had found so rough and cruel a nest, and to mitigate for them the terrors and sufferings she had known so long herself.

For, with the true reasoning of ignorance and brutality, Già deemed that to break the spirit and dull the brain was the surest method of enforcing obedience, and that the law of fear was surer and quicker in its results than that of kindness.

The child Quità, who was intelligent and thoughtful beyond her years, was apt enough at learning the steps and postures he taught her. She danced with a wondrous grace, a subtlety and intensity of delight that made each motion an instinct of poetry more than mere mechanical

effort; she would poise herself with the grace of a bird on a bough, of a leaf in the wind; she would sway to and fro with the graceful sensuous motion, the dreamy poetic indolence that seems inborn in the dancing-girls of the East, and that some freak of nature had bestowed on her. At such times as these her taskmaster would watch her from under his bent shaggy brows with a look of ferocious satisfaction, and mutter through his white gleaming teeth of a future in store for her when her grace and her beauty should win back showers of gold to repay him for his labours now.

And at such times the woman would tremble and turn away sick and sad at heart, for well she knew the future mapped out for the little tender child, whose beauty was her only dower, but whose sex would prove that beauty's curse in the years to come!

"You will not harm her, Già," she said imploringly once, when through long hours of practising the child had shown no weariness, but danced on and on with a magical, exquisite grace, that was faultless even in her master's ruthless sight. "She is so fair, and sweet, and patient."

He laughed.

"Harm her? No; a woman-child, with a face and form like that, will never meet with harm, save she herself chooses it. She may rule the world if she will!"

And Lisa shuddered, and turned more pale than even her wont. Was she not a woman, and did she not know how the world repays such rule as he spoke of?

"Holy Mother!" she murmured, low and faint, as she left her husband's presence, "thou wert a woman once thyself; let that plea wing my prayers to thee now, for the safety of the child I love!"

But if that Virgin Mother heard the prayer, she gave no heed or sign then.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE SPINNING OF THE WEB."

"AND you could learn nothing?" said Mdlle. Thé, looking up at the handsome face of the young Englishman.

Cecil Calverley had but just returned to Paris, and taken the opportunity of calling on the beautiful actress, in order to acquaint her with the non-success of their mission.

"Nothing," he answered. "From the hour that Gaspard Ducroix took the children from their foster-mother's care, their whole existence seems shrouded in mystery. My friend, Lord Danvers, is grievously disappointed."

"Is he in Paris also?"

"Yes. He was unable to call to-day; but I undertook to give you all the necessary information."

"I am very glad to see you again," she said softly. "No excuse was necessary for your visit. You will always bring your own welcome, just as I shall always be your debtor."

"I wish your memory were not so faithful," said Cecil. "Who would not have gladly done for you the little that I did?"

"Nay, monsieur; your feat of heroism deserves a better name. As for your question—well, *who* did, save yourself?"

"Pray forget it, mademoiselle," continued the young man, looking decidedly embarrassed.

"I told you before I could never do that," she answered, with a glance more eloquent than her words. "But since you are too modest to listen to your own praises, monsieur, let us change the subject. Do you stay long in Paris?"

"No; I return to England almost immediately."

A shade of disappointment seemed to rest on the face of the beautiful actress.

"It is your home, I suppose?"

"Ostensibly, yes. But I am something of a wanderer. I don't think I take kindly to the

frivolities of fashionable life, or to the society of my fellow-man."

"Indeed!" and there was natural curiosity in the gaze that met his own. "That is a somewhat strange confession for one of your years and —position."

"The accident of temperament is to blame for the one; that of birth for the other."

"You are not a democrat, monsieur?"

"Not in a political sense, I suppose. But I fear I have small patience with class prejudices."

"And yet to look at you, one would say you were 'aristocrat' *au bout des ongles.*"

Cecil laughed.

"That applies more to my friend Danvers than myself. He is strictly encased in British prejudices and proprieties. I—well, a knapsack and a shooting-jacket answer most of my requirements, and my feet are my trustiest friends. I should scarcely like to say how many miles they have traversed—how much service they have done."

"You look as if you would always make life enjoyable to yourself," said his companion, letting her eyes rest thoughtfully on the frank handsome

face. "But I should say you would care for no existence in which the mind had not a share."

"Are you, then, a reader of character, mademoiselle?"

"No; but *that* is easily discerned. Intelligence is the one thing most difficult to hide."

"You flatter me."

"I have no wish to do so. Some men think it meritorious to affect ignorance or stupidity; others to display the meretricious attainments which pass current for knowledge or culture. It is only those who have nothing to gain by concealment or to fear from display who are at once natural and easy to read."

"Your art makes you a student of human nature, I see," answered Cecil, regarding her with more attention than he had yet bestowed. "Your sex as a rule do not trouble to look below the surface. Perhaps, after all, they are right. Few of us repay a deeper knowledge of our real natures."

A warm flush stole over her face at his words. She found herself wondering whether any other meaning lay beneath them.

"You are right," she said. "Few lives or

friendships are quite free from self-deception. It is so often the ideal we create that we worship; it is no wonder we would scarcely thank the hand that lifted the mask. Women, even more than men, suffer from such impracticable devotion. You invest us with a thousand attributes, because we possess one that pleases you, and then visit your own disappointment on our inability to answer such expectations."

"You are severe, mademoiselle. Yet your own case must surely be the exception to the rule you lay down."

"How do you know?" she asked quickly, almost angrily.

"Pardon me, if I say that such artistic fame as Mdlle. D'Egmont has won would make a greater sceptic than myself believe in its merit."

"Fame!" she said scoffingly. "*Such* fame! In my heart I despise it, and I know you do the same. I read that in your words the other day. A woman's fame, too! When did it ever mean anything to her save misconception by the many —jealousy from the few? I would rather have strength, liberty, manhood, than any woman's gift of beauty or burden of genius. The one gives

you the freedom of the world—the other holds you in the bondage to every light tongue or idle jester upon whose lips your name is a fit subject for sport."

"You speak bitterly. I should fancy the world's resentment and you, were strangers as yet."

"That shows how little you know of me, monsieur—or have learnt."

Beneath the interrogation of her glance Cecil Calverley felt his face flush. He marvelled whether she was acting a part now or showing herself in her real nature to him. It was a dangerous thought even to one so indifferent to women, so little the bond-slave of passion as himself.

"You are right. I know but little of you," he said, and a slight embarrassment was in his voice and face. "That is my misfortune, of course. I am but a bird of passage. Of the doings of the world I hear but little and care less. I believe I am a born Bohemian, though unfortunately compelled often by circumstances to don dress clothes and bow to the presiding goddess of social martyrdom. I have offended all my family and most of my friends. I love liberty, and Fate has made me a vassal. To spite Fate, I endeavour

to take the law of independence into my own hands. There is my history for you, mademoiselle."

"A history you need not be ashamed of," she said, a certain sympathy in her voice and eyes that spoke of fellow-feeling. "Shall I return your confidence in kind? The world will tell you soon enough what it believes me. Let me tell you for myself what I was and am. To others I have never cared to speak of these things; but I am your debtor to my life's end, monsieur, and I should like you to think that the life you have rescued is not so unworthy as you might be led to suppose."

"Madame, I assure you——"

"*Pardon,*" she interrupted. "You are young, and brave, and credulous. You would be any woman's champion, so long as you knew she was not utterly worthless. My days of illusion are long over. The sins and sorrows of life have saddened my youth, and left me with but one purpose in that life now. What that purpose is I will tell you, and when you know, it will seem to you better a thousand times that you had left me to perish in the flames that night than live on as I live now."

Her voice had sunk to a whisper. Cecil watched her—aroused—fascinated despite himself, yet repelled by the doubts of her truth and the knowledge of her character that had come to him from the lips of the Count de Besançon.

"Your friend perhaps has told you of my sister," she said presently, calming her voice by a perceptible effort. "But he could have told you nothing of her love for me—of mine for her. In all the world she was the only being I loved, and her life of martyrdom seems to embitter all my past and urge me on to revenge it in the future. If ever an angel wore mortal guise, and in it lived and walked this world, Valerie was that mortal. Yet her life was one long martyrdom—her death shame. The crown of honour she should have worn in all men's sight, only a circlet of thorns that pierced her brow and tortured her with agony. Who gave her this martyrdom to bear? A man! Who were her traducers, her betrayers, her most faithless friends, her worst enemies? Men! Who stole every joy from her life, and dishonoured her womanhood, and turned her heart to bitterness and despair? Men. And who, when sick with the struggle, and worn out

with the warfare, she crept aside to solitude, and so despairing, died—who, then, with foul calumny and ignoble jests, made mockery of her griefs and pelted even her death-bed with stones of falsehood and of shame? Men, still men!"

Her form shook with a sudden shudder; she rose from her seat, and Cecil's wondering eyes gazed at her almost in awe, so transfigured was she by the passion of her emotions—the memory of those wrongs she had enumerated.

"I watched her death even as I had watched her life," she went on presently, her voice trembling, her eyes dimmed by a mist of tears. "And in my soul a great bitterness and a great hatred grew like twin-seeds, sown by a careless hand. Beside her death-bed I took an oath to avenge her, not on *one* man, but on all the race of men who should come in my way—for whom I should hold any allurement—over whom I should hold any sway. Four years ago, and I was young, fair, innocent, trusting! Now—my God! Now I see in all men my enemies—in all women my traducers; in life but one purpose; in death—an endless despair. That is my history. Make of it what you will, and when you hear my

name, as you assuredly will hear it, think of all I have borne, all that has gone to make me what the world believes—Faustine!"

Cecil had risen too. His brow was flushed with mingled feelings; his heart throbbing almost with pain. Young, chivalrous, brave, ardent as he was, this woman's words fell like fire on his heart, and thrilled him with their passion and their scorn.

"I will not deny what I have heard of you," he said impetuously. "But even then I gave it little credence; now I give it none."

A strange smile stole over her face, mingling softness with irony, bitterness with regret.

"*You* believe in me?" she said gently, and her eyes rested on him, and their gaze filled him with a strange unrest. "Ah, monsieur, you are my preserver. I owe you my life. Why will you make me still further your debtor? Think of me as others think; believe of me what others believe. Let your doubts outlive my refutation, and your chivalry be like the world's. So best will you content yourself and serve me."

For a moment Cecil Calverley was silent. The strangeness of this interview—the suddenness of

this confidence—the beauty and sorcery of this woman, had affected him despite himself. A strange scene truly for a morning call!

"I cannot obey you," he said gravely. "For after your words I can have no further belief in the world's scandals. You may have been sinned against—your purpose may be ignoble. With that I have nothing to do; but believe me, there will always be one to have faith in you, and to discredit what evil is said of you; and that one is myself."

"Thank you," she said simply. "I do not know what has prompted me to speak to you as I have done. The impulse of a moment, or the trust you have inspired. We do not meet on common ground, you know. Between us there will always be the memory of benefit conferred and received. We may never meet again—or we may. I cannot tell. Our paths in life lie wide apart. There are errors that have had root in virtues, and virtues that have been reared in vice. You cannot judge me as I am; and if you are wise you will go your way, and forget my name and myself. I, for my part, shall have

no memory of you that is not grateful, though to me all men are enemies—now."

Was it in human nature to hear such words —words uttered by a beautiful woman, and not feel piqued and—a little hurt? Indifferent as Cecil Calverley was to women's beauty and women's charms, yet when those dark mocking eyes swept over him like a challenge, a kindred defiance awoke in his own.

"Answer me one question," he said impulsively. "Has no man been aught to you but an enemy—yet?"

"As I live, no!" she said with kindred impetuosity.

He drew a step nearer. His face flushed; his heart beat with a tumultuous energy that sent the blood rushing through his veins.

"One word more," he said, and the bold bright eyes looked straight into hers, while a new strange power of command thrilled his voice. "Will no man ever be aught but an enemy to you in the future? Are you sure of that?"

Involuntarily her eyes fell. Over all her beauty came a sudden warmth and softness, subtle

and dangerous, and indescribable, as flame or fire.

"Can anyone be sure of the future?" she said evasively.

"No," he answered softly, "for Fate lies in ambush at every step."

"And Fate is but another name for—love!" she sighed; and their eyes met, and with no need of words Cecil Calverley knew that he at least was in her sight no enemy.

CHAPTER IX.

ENTANGLEMENT.

THE first step towards the subjugation of a man is to arouse his interest.

That is a thing not always easy to do, for men get into a way of thinking one woman very much the same as another; and, unless suddenly aroused or startled into closer observation, will seldom trouble their heads about them once they are out of their presence. It is not so often a beautiful woman who will dwell in a man's memory as a woman who, by some piquante charm or characteristic trick of manner, wins his attention in the first instance, and is clever enough to keep it awake and trace on it a picture of herself in the next.

He begins to think of her, speculate about her, dwell on her. Beauty alone is merely an

attraction; there is something more required to fascinate and subdue, and provoke and arouse, and so draw the subtle network of interest around one special face or form, until the woman who owns it stands out in clear and distinct relief from among a crowd of others, more beautiful perhaps, equally charming, or gifted, yet who fall into the background before her memory, and only act as shadows to the sunlight of her actual presence.

Once let a man's thoughts busy themselves about a woman, and they will scarcely stop there. If she be able to interest him once, so surely will he desire to know more of her, and, if she be worth knowing, it will be strange indeed if such knowledge ends not in something warmer than the feeling she at first inspired.

Flattered vanity may be the groundwork of love more often than is supposed. To know that we are pleasing to another is no unsatisfactory thought to ourselves; it may seem an ignoble one, on which to base a pure and impersonal passion; but it very often is the foundation-stone of its structure nevertheless. That strange unconscious magnetism, which draws two

lives together, has perhaps for its origin a thread of attraction as little visible to either as the first frail gossamer of a spider's web, but as little by little that thread is converted into a network that means bondage or death, so subtly and surely and imperceptibly does love weave its spells and close us in a myriad meshes, of whose formation we have been unconscious.

No power can unweave that web; it can only be—broken.

When Cecil Calverley had gone into Faustine's presence that morning it was with no other thought of her than he had hitherto held of all women whom he had known. When he left her he was astonished—puzzled—interested.

Beauty in every shape and form and hue was to him a familiar thing. It is the essence of an artist's being, and Cecil had the artistic faculty to his heart's core. The personal loveliness of the woman whose life he had saved had in no way allured or disturbed him. But her words had.

He saw she was unhappy, bitter, misjudged; and the knowledge first startled and then appealed to that innate chivalry which lives in the minds of

all men who have honour and compassion for what is weak, and frail, and feminine. Faustine as an actress repelled him; as a woman, young, suffering, outraged, she aroused his pity. She forced him to think of her whether he would or no.

There had been no intention on her part to do this. He stood in her sight as no other man had yet stood. She was his debtor, and the thought was strangely sweet to her, but none the less was he of the sex she counted as enemies, distrusted as friends, despised as lovers. As he passed from her sight, she, to whom every faintest sign of passion's birth was known, knew also that he would as surely seek her again; that in his young, brave, fearless heart she had sown the first seeds of tumult and discontent, and for once she felt reluctant to pursue the work or reap the harvest of madness that might follow.

Love was wearisome to her as an oft-repeated tale. Such love as she had inspired a hundred times was too easy, too familiar to be of any value But for once her thoughts followed a man who had left her presence, and her face grew shadowed with discontent as if those thoughts were neither pleasant nor desirable.

"I had better never see him again," she murmured restlessly. "It would be the greatest kindness I can show him. He does not even know his own danger yet. For myself——"

She paused. The mirror at which she involuntarily glanced showed her her own face in all its sorcery of beauty, and a strange smile stole over her lips. It faded away, and was followed by a sigh. She rose impatiently, and went to the piano and took out some songs, and then sat down to sing. But she finished the thought in her own mind.

"After all, why should I not, if it pleases me? I have never known happiness—yet."

Had Lord Danvers been less preoccupied in mind, he would have noticed a difference in Cecil Calverley's manner when he spoke of that morning's interview. As it was, he listened with but slight attention, and asked no questions respecting the beautiful actress, with whose history he was so strangely connected.

The thought of being unable to accomplish Valerie's last wishes was always uppermost in his mind. It angered him when he reflected on

his own impotence, and remembered her unfulfilled desires.

But he was powerless to alter the one or execute the other.

"I am sick of Paris," he said to Cecil that night, as they strolled homewards through the brilliantly-lighted streets. "I shall return to England. Let us leave to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" echoed Cecil doubtfully. "That is very sudden. There is that picture I want to copy in the Louvre, you know. Why are you in such a hurry to leave Paris?"

"I am a restless mortal always," he said with a short laugh, "and Paris has so many memories for me. Well, I will go to Brussels, and come back for you in a week's time; how will that suit?"

"Admirably," said Cecil, conscious and yet ashamed of a certain relief the words brought him. "My picture will be quite finished by that time."

"Why you wish to copy I don't know," resumed Lord Danvers presently. "I thought you only cared to create."

"So I do, chiefly, but that picture is so mar-

vellous. I feel I must have it. And then Paris has no memories for—me!"

"Not yet," said Lord Danvers quietly. "But take care of yourself. It is always easy to mock at danger when danger is far away."

Cecil laughed—the frank, heartwhole, happy laughter that is so good to hear, that we seldom do hear after the first freshness of youth is over.

"Danger!" he said; "I have no fear. Art is my only mistress, and I mean to be true to her, exacting as she is."

"You sit upon a hollow throne for all that," murmured his friend sententiously. "Trust me, your heart will rebel even if your mind be content. The artist is but mortal after all."

"How you do harp upon that one string," said Cecil impatiently. "I care for women as little as you yourself, French women in particular."

Yet even as he said the words a certain warmth crept over his face, a little uneasiness stole into his heart. He remembered two eyes, soft, luminous, unspeakably sad, that had looked into his own not many hours before, and in his memory still lingered the words he had heard that day, from

a woman's lips: "You cannot judge me as I am, and if you are wise you will go your way and forget me."

Why could he not be wise? Why was he so averse to leave Paris then and there, and go with Lord Danvers to England?

Ah, why?

There are some questions we dare not ask ourselves, because we dread the answer we should feel compelled to give.

The next day, true to his word, Lord Danvers left Paris. The next day, also, Cecil Calverley betook himself to his work of copying the picture that had so enchanted him, but for once his thoughts were preoccupied, his fingers listless, his mind astray from his occupation, and so slowly did the painting progress, that at last, vexed and impatient with himself, he put it aside and went out into the gay streets, and so on, half mechanically, till he found himself in the Bois. Crowds of people were all about; the birds were singing among the budding leaves; the wind blew fresh and sweet from the west, with all the promise of spring in its fragrant breath; the sunshine sparkled clear and brilliant everywhere. He felt refreshed and in-

vigorated. The impatience and unrest left him, and turning away from the throng he sauntered slowly down one of the *allées des piétons*. There he came face to face with a woman dressed in some soft dusky fabric, out of which her beauty shone brilliant and alluring as the day. A servant walked behind her. By her side was a great dog, carrying in his mouth a basket of violets.

Impulsively Cecil stopped. It was Faustine. She only bowed and passed on, leaving him flushed, irresolute, disturbed. He would have liked to have spôken to her, but he dared not follow, since she had so evidently discouraged his intention. He had no choice but to pursue his way through the yet leafless avenues; but it seemed to him suddenly as if the spring day lacked something of the brilliance and exhilarance it had possessed a short time before.

Turn where he would, a woman's face seemed to haunt him, and two soft luminous eyes looked back at him wherever he gazed.

In a fever of impatience he went back to his hotel and took out a square of canvas, and so set himself to work to produce that face from memory. He painted on till dusk. Then, as he put his brush

away with a sigh of regret, a little perfumed note was brought to him.

It contained an invitation from Faustine that he would make one of her supper-party that evening. Two days before Cecil Calverley would have rejected such an invitation with a laugh and a little contempt. Now—now he accepted it without an instant's hesitation.

CHAPTER X.

DOWN TO THE DEEPS.

Let me go over your good gifts
That crown you queen.

It was with mingled feelings that Cecil found himself in the supper-room of the beautiful actress.

Even his artistic eyes could find no fault with the room or its appointments. No meretricious gilding, nor gaudy hues, nor ostentatious display of luxury was here. Only soft, deep-toned hues, and shaded lights, and masses of ferns and flowers in every nook, and alternating with the silver and crystal of the table.

The company assembled were but six in all—a young French poet; a singer, with a sweet pale face and a divine voice, whose fame was well known to the young Englishman; an elderly lady, with the well-preserved grace and faultless

charm of a thoroughly-refined Frenchwoman, and whom Mdlle. D'Egmont introduced laughingly as her duenna; an actor of the Comédie Française, well renowned for his wit and good looks; and Cecil himself, completed the number of guests.

It was a new element of society to Cecil Calverley, and he enjoyed it. There was nothing in the tone of conversation to have offended the most fastidious taste, and the hostess herself was so brilliant and charming that Cecil found himself watching and wondering about her more and more. The vague element of distrust that had been aroused in his mind by the Count de Besançon had utterly died away now. Looking at the beautiful proud face, listening to the somewhat disdainful indifference or contemptuous sarcasms with which she answered any words of compliment, he found himself more puzzled and disturbed than he could have believed possible.

He spoke but little himself; yet a vainer man than he could not but have seen that their hostess always listened when he spoke, and that when her eyes met his, their languor or indifference changed to a certain softness and melancholy that was infinitely alluring.

Various subjects of conversation arose, and were discussed. Art, of course, and all matters appertaining to it—the stage, too, and its many-sided life, were touched upon; but Mdlle. D'Egmont seemed less inclined to pursue that subject than any other—another anomaly at which Cecil wondered.

When supper was over, her servants brought cigars and liqueurs, and set them before the guests; and the actress rose from the table and threw herself down on one of the many inviting-looking lounges scattered about the room. Her two friends followed her example.

"Don't you smoke?" she asked Cecil in surprise, as she saw him decline a cigar.

"I do, but not in the presence of ladies," he answered. "Pipes and cigars, like everything else material, have their own charms in their own place."

"I do not object to it," she said, regarding him with some surprise; "I hope it is not out of consideration for me that you are so self-denying."

"Don't give me credit for a motive so virtuous," laughed the young man. "I am simply not a

slave to the habit, though I occasionally indulge in it."

He rose as he spoke and came over to where she was seated, and drew a low chair close to her own.

"I would prefer to talk to you—if I may," he said in a low voice.

"Would you object to my smoking while you do so, then?" she asked coolly, as she drew a small stand beside her, and took from it a dainty embroidered cigarette-case.

Cecil drew back involuntarily. He detested the habit in a woman, and the smile on his lips was somewhat forced as he answered:

"Of course not."

"I can see you do not approve, though," she said, with a mocking smile; "but everyone does it now. By-the-way, where is your friend—Lord Danvers?"

"He has gone to Brussels."

"He is very rich, is he not?" she pursued.

"He is considered so," said Cecil briefly; "and he is an only son."

"You seem great friends," said Mdlle. D'Egmont, with a rapid glance at her companion's

face; "but he is much older than yourself, is he not?"

"A few years—yes."

"I believe in men's friendships," she continued, poising the cigarette in her fingers. "I think they do hold good amidst the storms and calms of life. Ours seldom do. I wonder why. But I do not speak from experience. I have never made a woman a friend in the real sense of the word. Somehow I don't get on with them."

It was a grand opening for a compliment had Cecil Calverley felt disposed to pay one, but the conventional phrases of modern society were not familiar to him, and he passed the opportunity by.

"I think there is more reality about men's friendships," he said; "there seems to be an innate rivalry among women. They find it hard to forgive each other for being better looking or better dressed, or winning more admiration. Now these questions never enter a man's mind. He likes his friends for their own sakes. The fact of their being popular, rich, admired, would make no real difference to his feelings."

"Unless a woman sowed discord."

"That, of course. Unfortunately, it has often happened."

"But not with you?"

She spoke quickly, impulsively. The surprise in his glance as he looked at her warned her of her error.

"I beg your pardon. I have of course no right to ask such a question."

"Do not apologise—there is no need," he answered quietly. "No, not with me."

"Do you follow him to Brussels?" she asked, after a short pause.

"No. He returns here in a week's time, and then we go to England together. It is twelve months since I was home."

"You will be glad to see it again, then," she said, tossing the half-finished cigarette aside, while a shadow seemed to fall over her face. "Home—how empty a sound that is for some ears, how sweet and full a one for others! For me, I have never known a home."

"It is a sad confession for a woman's lips," said Cecil gently; "but it is too often the penalty they pay for fame or greatness."

A sigh escaped her lips.

"Ah!" she murmured, "if it were only *that!*"

A momentary silence fell between them. An eager buzz of conversation was going on amongst the other guests. Cecil and his companion seemed quite unnoticed. The young man looked at her as she leant back on her chair—that shadow of melancholy on her face, of weariness in her eyes. They only heightened the charm of her beauty and appealed to him more powerfully than her brilliance or coquetry could ever have done. He bent lower over her, and his voice grew softer as he spoke.

"You bade me believe what the world said of you, once," he murmured hurriedly; "I could not. You told me we might never meet again, yet we have done so. I came here to-night because I felt I *must* see you. I lingered on in Paris for that same reason. Tell me, why did you contradict your own words? Why did you bid me to your presence again when you must know the danger that lives there? Your power is an old-told tale to you, doubtless. A week ago I could have smiled at it; now—I know how fatal that power may be!"

He had not meant to say such words, but they

had rushed to his lips impulsively. He so longed to know if indeed the world had wronged her as he believed, and the sorcery of her beauty swept over him like a fire, before whose breath prudence and self-control and prejudice were shrivelled up and effaced.

Her face flushed. She looked quickly up at him.

"I will not affect to misunderstand you," she answered, her voice so low that he could scarcely hear it. "I did say we had better never meet again, and then contradicted my own words on the impulse of a moment. I met you this morning. I knew you were in Paris alone, and so I asked you to come. I can never look upon you as a stranger, for I cannot forget I owe you my life, and it would be untruthful did I say I cared to see you no more."

The subtle flattery of the words stole into his heart and made it beat more wildly than it had ever done for any woman's words yet.

"You are kind, and cruel too," he said involuntarily.

She laughed with a little contempt.

"I have small faith in men's words. I told

you once before how I regarded them. But I cannot call you an enemy, nor would I ask you to call me a friend. Yes, after all I should have allowed my first resolve to stand. But I am little accustomed to consider my motives. I act but too often on impulse. You are sorry then, you came?"

"Can you ask that? I only fear that your gratitude will be more cruel than your forgetfulness, since you have taught me also to remember."

"A man's memory is rarely faithful," she said coldly. "In a week's time you will have left Paris. Another week will supply you with oblivion."

"How can you tell that? If you judge me by others you should remember that every rule has its exception."

"Yours is not an easy character to read," she answered lightly; "but I could see soon enough that you were indifferent to women. Had it been otherwise—well, I might have thought twice before asking you here."

"A man may be indifferent for long, simply because no woman he has met has had the power to change the feeling into anything warmer."

"True," she said musingly; "but such a man has always an ideal in his own mind, and the woman he loves must in some way resemble it. Have you not had something of that sort in yours?"

"I believe I have; but it was a something so vague and shadowy that it could hardly be materialised, I fancy."

"You artists are more independent of reality than any other class of beings. Everything is too beautiful in your dreams for the coarser rivalry of flesh and blood. I think you are to be envied. Genius is independent of sympathy; it contents itself."

"Not always. It is too often a gift that breaks the heart of its possessor. Do not all the records of great lives breathe out something of the sorrow and suffering within? If they do not stoop to conciliate, or pause to explain, they find but scant comprehension and still less belief."

"You speak bitterly for one so young," said Mdlle. D'Egmont thoughtfully. "You at least seem supremely indifferent to the world's opinions."

"I trouble very little about them. But I scarcely consider myself an artist; dearly as I love brush and pencil, I am selfish enough to work for my own pleasure—certainly not for fame."

"And yet you have won it. You see I have discovered your secret."

"You are clever enough to discover most things, madame," answered the young man gravely.

"And be equally dissatisfied with the result," she said indifferently. "It is a sad experience when one stands and looks at life, and sees nothing that can give a throb of pleasure, a brief forgetfulness, a semblance of what poet's call happiness."

"A sad experience, as you say; but surely not your own?"

"Whose else should it be? And it is not so wonderful or so exceptional a case I dare believe."

"Perhaps not, but it is difficult to believe it applies to yourself."

"I don't see why. Few of us wear our real faces for the world nowadays. And as there are

few lives without reproach, so there are still fewer that bear no burden of pain or shadow of suffering. But now, monsieur, my guests are rising. Our conversation has lasted long enough. Do you care for cards? We generally play here."

The old reckless defiance was in her voice once more. It fell on Cecil like a shock that sobered and startled him at one and the same moment. Talking to her he had forgotten——

What? He scarcely knew.

Vague doubts arose again. The disquietude he had banished for a time returned and filled him with a certain restlessness and pain his life had never known before.

"If you will excuse me, I will take my leave now," he said in answer to her question. "I am no card-player."

"And no smoker! Ah, monsieur, the world will allow you no virtues if you have not some vices; surely you know that?"

Cecil laughed.

"I have vices enough," he said. "Do not fear it will be my fate to be canonised. I know most games of skill and chance, but it is my

misfortune that, once known, they have lost their interest."

"If that be the case, I will not seek to detain you," she answered, holding out her hand. "Adieu."

"Will you not rather say, *au revoir?* May I not come again?"

"If you wish, certainly," she said, looking at him with evident surprise. "But, believe me, it is best you do not."

"May I judge of that? I know your meaning. I feel you are right; but obedience is less easy now than it would have been—a week ago."

"Hush!" she said softly. "No empty courtesies between us. If you care to come, come. I shall always be glad to see you."

She withdrew her hand, and Cecil calmly made his adieux to her other guests. Then he went homewards through the streets, his pulses throbbing, his brain dizzy as with wine.

The passion he had scorned had laid its first spell upon him.

CHAPTER XI.

If one should love you with real love
(Such things have been).

After her guests had left, Faustine threw herself down on the cushions of her couch, all the vivacity and abandon of her manner gone now, a strange weariness and sadness on her face.

"What made me do it?" she asked herself restlessly. "Why did I bid him come? He is so different to all other men—young, brave, loyal, chivalrous. And he will believe, perhaps. It would be so easy to make him do *that*. And the greater his faith, the greater his sufferings. Shall I spare him in time?"

A servant entered with letters and disturbed her thoughts. Mechanically she glanced at the different handwritings, but at one she started and seemed visibly disturbed. Hastily tearing

open the envelope she read a few lines, then the colour faded from her face, leaving her pale as death. "How strange!" she murmured. "Just now, too. Surely he could not have known—and yet the burning of the theatre was in all the papers. The name might have been published."

Again she read the letter, and again the same discomposure was evident in her face and manner. "Is it fate?" she muttered. "A moment ago, and I had resolved to see him no more; but Père Jerome's words are a command. How could he have known already?"

Thoughtfully and sadly she folded the letter up, and then locked it away in her escritoire. "I cannot send him away now, it is out of my power," she sighed, and so went slowly away to her sleeping-room, disturbed, yet not ill-pleased that the decision had been taken out of her own hands.

Meanwhile Cecil was bewildered, ill at ease, yet vaguely conscious of a new and subtle change within himself—a something he feared to analyse, yet could not wholly disregard. His heart was moved to a certain softness and pain that his life had never known.

"I am surely not mad enough to care for a woman, after all," he thought impatiently; "and such a woman! What is her beauty but a snare? How can my ideal of the purity and innocence of womanhood find an answering representative in one whose name is on all men's lips, whose nature is so mingled and contradictory, whose words never refute the evil spoken of her? Ah, heaven! if the spirit within her were but as fair as the form, who could resist her? Is it my misfortune that I cannot be content with mere personal loveliness? Other men would ask no more, and she has sought—me."

The night brought him no sleep or rest for once. He saw nothing but that one face, now brilliant with all the sorcery of loveliness, now shadowed and subdued to yet more dangerous charm by feelings that seemed earnest, and regrets that bore the stamp of reality. She had herself told him that all men were her enemies and her victims. Did she but seek to place him on that fatal list? Was even her gratitude a snare?

"Can I forget her if I never see her more?" he asked himself through those long sleepless hours, when he tossed feverishly to and fro,

haunted but by one memory—pursued but by one thought.

He could not answer that question: but the pain it brought might have done so, had he known more of human passions and dwelt less on ideal perfection. His life, for once, seemed to have passed beyond his own control, and a vague dissatisfaction took the place of its former peace. There was bitterness and sweetness both, in these memories. At least, she had remembered him, she had cared to see him, and he alone, of all her guests, had she favoured with marked personal attention. Then, too, she was not happy. Whatever shadows of sin and suffering lay about her they might not have been of her own bringing; her words had breathed as much, and all that was best and most chivalrous in Cecil Calverley's nature responded to the pity she had evoked.

So he thought and so he wondered all through the long dark hours—a thousand vague fancies, and painful doubts, and wild hopes surging through his brain. The softness of a woman's smile—the sorcery of a woman's memory—these things meant nothing to him as yet. He could not have believed even now that they were suf-

ficient foundation for the structure of an intense and heartfelt passion. Yet they were.

With the daylight he fell asleep, worn out and spent by such novel emotion. When he woke, his eyes fell on a letter placed by his side. He tore it hastily open, and read an urgent entreaty from the Superior of the Home where he had placed his little foundling. "The child is very ill," ran the message; "she cries incessantly for you. If it be in your power to come, pray do so at once."

Cecil sprang up and dressed with all haste. "I must go—of course," he said to himself.

Then the memory of the previous night flashed across him. Leaving Paris would be to leave Faustine. He paused and leant against his dressing-table, and his face grew very troubled. He felt strangely reluctant to quit Paris just now, and yet—might it not be best? "If it be but a fancy, I shall soon forget it," he said to himself with sudden resolution. "Absence will surely cure me."

That day, when, in obedience to her received instructions, Faustine despatched a message to Cecil Calverley at his hotel, her messenger re-

turned with the answer that the English gentleman had departed suddenly from Paris that morning, leaving no address and no information as to when he would return.

A cloud crossed the brow of the beautiful actress as she heard. Men, as a rule, were not eager—or, indeed, able—to escape from her fascinations once she had chosen to exert them. After his words, too, the previous evening!

"He is wise," she thought with a strange smile, "wiser than I feared he would prove, but I do not like the feeling of being baffled. If fate throws him across my path again—well, I think he will not escape so easily a second time."

It was as well Cecil Calverley did not see her then with that mocking smile on her lips, that evil glitter in her eyes. His vague fears might have assumed shape and form. At least the dawn of passion might have had no day. But he was far away now, and her memory only pursued him the more persistently because he had been forced to leave her by circumstances, just as he had been led to her by fate.

The good Mother Thérèse, Superior of the

Convent or Retreat of Notre Dame de Bon Secours, was sitting alone in her little chamber. The spring sunlight fell on her placid face, the dusky folds of her dress, and the long rosary at her waist. It lit up the pictured saints on the wall, the missal on her lap, the bunches of primroses and violets grouped together in a quaint old bowl before her. The surroundings were so peaceful and so fair that they seemed to speak in the very eloquence of silence of the safe calm life led within those walls; yet on the aged face was a strangely troubled look, and on the brow a cloud of heavy care. Suddenly she rang a bell beside her, and rose from her seat, and stood upright and rigid, with the beads of her rosary clasped tight in her fingers, and her eyes fixed with pained intensity on the door of her room.

It opened softly, and one of the sisters appeared in answer to her summons.

"What news?" the Superior asked anxiously.

"None better, holy mother. The child has passed a bad night, and seems weaker than ever this morning."

"Who is with her now?"

"Sister Veronica."

"Good; I will be there directly. Stay, is that the convent-bell?"

"Yes, *ma mère*. It has just rung."

"Who can it be?—at this hour, too."

"Père Jerome, perhaps," hazarded the sister respectfully. "It is about the time for one of his visits."

"Go and see, and bring me word here; and remember, it is my wish that special prayers be said in the chapel, and by the sisters individually, for the recovery of the child."

The sister bowed silently and left the room, while the aged mother reseated herself to wait for tidings of the visitor.

Suddenly, in the convent aisle without came the sound of a firm loud tread. She started and listened eagerly.

"Not Père Jerome's velvet footfall," she said to herself. "Who can it be?"

Her doubts were soon at rest, for the door unclosed and revealed the stalwart figure and handsome face of Cecil Calverley.

"Ah, my son, welcome!" cried the good mother, rising and stretching out her hands

in fervent greeting. "So you have received my letter?"

"Yes, madame, as you see," answered the clear ringing tones of the young Englishman. "How is the child?"

"My son," said the aged woman sadly, "you find us in deep sorrow; the child (may the saints bless her!) is very ill. For the last few months she has pined and fretted herself about something or someone; we cannot tell who or what it is. No one can console her. The constant mourning has been too much for the little heart to bear. Her health has given way, and she is very, very ill."

Tears dimmed the kind tender eyes as she spoke, and Cecil looked at the troubled, grieved old face with a sympathy that touched her deeply.

"I have grown to love her so dearly," she continued. "She is so sweet, so patient, so gentle. Never was child like her, I am sure! And so lovely, too! Her smile is like an angel's!"

"Can you find nothing out about her? She is old enough to have some memory of things or persons."

"She talks much about her mother, but we cannot find out her name, or where she lived. We can make nothing out of her words; she is so very young; only a babe, monsieur. And yet what a feeling heart in the tiny body!"

"What have you called her?" asked Cecil, as the good woman wiped her eyes and paused a moment for breath.

"We asked her her name, and she always said it was Elise; but as we have two sisters of that name here we call her Félise."

"May I see her now, madame?"

"Most assuredly, my son. She has never forgotten you; she speaks of you incessantly."

"Indeed; that shows a greater power of recollection than I should have thought possible in one so young. She saw me for such a short time, too!"

"Quite long enough, it appears, my son. And, indeed, I look upon it as my duty to foster such remembrance in her mind. Did you not save her life?"

"In common humanity, madame, I could not have done anything else. Pray, do not burden that life with a debt of gratitude owed to me!"

The venerable, simple-minded woman looked up at the young man's face with surprise.

"You have a noble heart, my son," she said, while her eyes wandered over the handsome figure before her with a wistful tenderness of regard.

He moved impatiently.

"We waste time in idle words, madame. Can you not bring me to the child now?"

The aged mother rose immediately, and, signing to him to follow her, she led the way to a pleasant little chamber with nothing conventual about it, save its extreme simplicity, and its panels carved with the heads of the saints, and hung with pictures of martyrs and angels.

The soft bright hues of spring flowers gleamed here and there from vase and cup; the little bed was pure and white as driven snow, and nestled amidst the pillows was the cherubic loveliness of the child he had rescued in the autumn woods a few months before.

She was white as the linen around her. Her closed eyes, with the long sweeping lashes resting on her cheeks, gave her an almost deathlike look. The little wasted hand which Cecil touched

was dry and hot as fire, and the tiny rosy mouth was parched and cracked as if with inward fever.

She looked so lovely, and yet so fragile in that trancelike rest that Cecil held his breath as he gazed, scarce able to believe it was anything mortal on which his eyes rested, or which his hand touched.

Suddenly her eyes opened. She looked up at the face bending so tenderly over her, and into her own came a rush of colour and a light of joy.

A cry, soft and glad as the coo of a nesting bird, escaped her lips. The little thin baby arms were flung eagerly round his neck as he bent his tall form towards her. A rush of tender, murmuring, incoherent words left her lips. Then she rested her head on his breast and nestled in his strong young arms, and so lay and fell asleep—content.

"Her first calm sleep for six long days and nights. Now our Blessed Lady be praised!" murmured the Superior in awed, hushed tones. "Could it be for you she fretted, my son?"

And Cecil, looking down at the face pillowed on his breast with the tumbled golden curls framing its beauty, and on the baby brow the rest and peace of contented slumber, felt a strange thrill of tenderness at his heart, and smiled, and was silent.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LITTLE FOUNDLING.

The first of any
Seem the happiest years that come.

CECIL stayed with his little foundling all through that lovely springtime.

Slowly and gradually her health improved, but her one incessant demand was for him, and he had not the heart to leave her.

He had a room in the neighbourhood of the convent, and devoted himself to painting an altar-piece as a gift for the good old Superior. As soon as ever the little one could leave her bed she was taken to her protector's quarters, and there she would lie on a couch by the window for the greater part of the day, looking with wondering eyes at his manipulation of brush and pencil, unconscious that she herself was acting as his model, and

that the sweet loveliness of her own face shone out from the canvas as that of the infant Christ.

Her dreamy, unchildish gravity, her sweetness of temper and docility of disposition; her quaint, old-fashioned fancies and passionate affection for himself—all touched the young man's heart with a strange pity and tenderness. She was never happy when away from him. His name lived in her childish prayers and occupied all her thoughts; and meanwhile she passed from convalescence to health, and the weeks glided by in a dreamy monotony that almost effaced all memory of time, while Cecil painted on in his little quiet chamber with glimpses of the fair spring verdure from its open windows, and the cadence of the *Angelus* or the far-off chant of hymns, and the swell of the organ music alone breaking the hush of perfect stillness around those quiet woods.

"I wonder what I shall do with you, little one?" said Cecil, musingly, one day, as he laid aside his painting-brush and met the wistful, loving gaze of the child's soft eyes fixed on his face.

"Let me stay with you," she said quickly, in a tone of one whose decision is incontrovertible.

The young man smiled.

"An easy way of solving the difficulty. But, suppose I cannot?"

Her face grew troubled and sad.

"I will be so good," she said in her pretty baby *patois*.

"I have no doubt of it, dear; but still I cannot take you with me when I go. I want to tell you you must stop here with the kind sisters, and be very good and obedient to them, and learn all they teach you; and then, some day, when you are older and cleverer, and can say what you would like to do, I will take you from here and place you with kind friends."

"Why will you not take me now?" she half sobbed, her pretty lips quivering, her eyes tearful under the shade of their heavy lashes.

"You cannot understand, dear, if I explain. I wish I could find out to whom you belonged. Is there no one, nothing you remember? Who left you in the wood where I found you?"

She shook her head in perplexity.

"I know 'Ita," she said. "Shall I see 'Ita if I'm good?"

"But who is 'Ita?"

"I love 'Ita. I was asleep, and then he took her away," the child lisped in her broken French.

"Who took her away?"

She shook her little head again and remained silent.

"Always the same," murmured Cecil impatiently. "We never get beyond that point."

"Perhaps you will find 'Ita," said the little one presently. "You found me."

"True enough. But if my destiny is to be that of discovering lost infants wherever I go, I shall have to found a foundling hospital on my own account," laughed Cecil with amusement.

The child looked gravely at him.

"I should like you to find 'Ita," she said solemnly. "If you go out in the world to look for her, I will stay here and pray for you."

"What is she like?" asked Cecil.

The little one looked at him in puzzled silence for a moment or two, then suddenly pointed to the picture from which the sad grave eyes of the Child-Christ looked out at them both.

"Like that," she said.

"But that is you!" Cecil told her in surprise. "I have painted your face there."

"No," was the reply, in tones of great decision, "that's 'Ita."

"Then 'Ita is a little child like yourself?" suggested Cecil. "A little girl you know—a sister, perhaps?"

The little face clouded once again.

"When I was asleep she went away," she said, repeating the words that Cecil had so often heard before, and which lay like a stumbling-block in the path of his investigations into the child's parentage or antecedents.

"Well, if I try and find 'Ita, will you remain here and not fret yourself ill any more?" asked Cecil at length.

She raised herself eagerly. "Oh yes. But you will come and see me? You won't go quite away and never come back?"

"Certainly not," Cecil assured her gravely. "I will come back as often as I can; and each time I come I shall expect to find you have learnt more and grown stronger, and are good and obedient to the kind old Mère Thérèse, who is so fond of you. You will be all this, my child, will you not?"

"If you tell me—yes."

And Cecil knew she meant it.

He had grown to feel a strange fondness for the little creature whose life he had saved; and, to his own thinking, and in obedience to those laws of conscience, duty, and integrity which he had framed, and to which he held so closely, he deemed it only his right to watch over the future of the helpless child thus thrown upon his care and dependent on his bounty. The singleness and fidelity of her love for him touched him very deeply; for a child's love is indeed a pearl of great price—a thing so pure, and unalienable, and faithful, that its spontaneous affection can never appeal in vain to any heart, unless, indeed, that heart be wholly vile or wholly callous.

To Cecil, in his hot, chivalrous, impulsive youth, with his artist's fancies and his poet's heart, this pure, unsought adoration of the child he had rescued appealed with tenfold power. He had saved her carelessly enough, it is true, and had thought then that, having provided for her a place of shelter and safety, he might acquit himself of further responsibility; but he found that this was not possible. Insensibly, her welfare had become to him a thing of importance; and

his liberal, compassionate heart opened to her with the fondness that was only an instinct, and the fidelity that claimed no recompense in the present and dreaded no shadow in the future.

"My little waif," he said tenderly, as those last words of hers reached him, "you will do all that is right, I know, for my sake, and I will do all I can for yours. I wish, though, you could enjoy the bright brief dawn of your childhood as thoroughly as others of your age and sex do; but, unfortunately, this home is not even like a convent, where other girls of your age are admitted for education. You will have none but the sisters to associate with, and they are all old gray-headed women. Still, you will be safe, and, I hope, happy."

"If you go, when will you come again?" she asked, not comprehending his words.

"With the autumn leaves," he answered brightly. "It will be a whole year then since I found you."

She sighed, and glanced out of the open window.

"It is a long time," she said softly, while a strange sadness crept over her childish face,

that gave it a gravity beyond its years. "But I will wait, and I will pray to God, as you told me, not to the saints."

"Ay, do," he said earnestly. "The God who made all the earth so beautiful, and would have made all life so fair, had man only let Him."

"Why would not man let Him?"

"Ah, my little one, that is just the question that vexes all philosophy and poisons every creed. Why? I suppose because sin is so much pleasanter than virtue, because the barter of unknown good for present enjoyment is so sweet and easy and irresistible, and the evil of the exchange is only learnt too late."

She looked wonderingly at him, not able to follow his words.

"You need not trouble about such things," he said softly, as he stroked the bright soft hair from her childish brow. "Evil is far enough from your knowledge yet. I would it might always remain so; but then one cannot always be a child."

"Is it best?" she asked gravely.

"Best? Aye—that it is—only the last to believe it are the children."

"One can do so much when one is grown up," she murmured. "I shall be glad when I am like you."

He laughed.

"Foolish one, how little you know of what is before you! You have the sun and the air, and the sweet untroubled calm of irresponsibility, and the love of good women, and you ought to be happy. When you are like me, as you say, you will look back on these things and wonder you never valued them more. A child's life in the woods, on the water, with a song on the lips, not a care in the heart, with no fear of the future, and an intense joy in the present—ah, my dear, there is not a man or woman who has not lived to envy that."

"I am happy when you are here," she said softly, leaning her warm bright cheek on his hand. "Must you go?"

He smiled a little sadly.

"I must. Do you know that it is only for your sake I have remained here so long? But when you were so ill, little one, I had not the heart to leave you, and so stayed on and on. But

I cannot do so any longer. I have my own duties in another home."

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"In England—not in your own land at all. I happened to be travelling here when I found you."

"Is it far? Will you take me there one day?"

Cecil looked doubtful. The claims of his foundling upon his future liberty for the first time pressed themselves on his notice.

"That I cannot promise," he answered her at length. "It is not always possible to do what one wills or wishes. And now, *petite*, run off; I hear Sister Marie's voice calling you, and she will scold me for sending you back with such a grave little face."

The child rose at once. Ready obedience was instinctive to her.

"Adieu!" she said, in her pretty childish way. "I will not forget what you have said to me; but don't be very long away."

"Are you afraid of forgetting me?"

"I could never do that," was the grave rejoinder; "not even if I do not see you again till I am a woman."

"A woman!" thought Cecil to himself, when she had left him, and he was busily replacing his paints and brushes. "A woman! Good heavens, I never thought of that when I rescued her from her forest cradle! What am I to do with her a few years hence?"

The future alone could answer that question.

"Shall I see *her* in Paris?" he asked himself as he was whirled at express speed back to the bright capital once more. "I have not forgotten her; does she remember me, I wonder?"

He threw himself back in his seat and gave himself up to thoughts he had long ceased striving to resist. No; he had not forgotten Faustine. Her spells had been sure enough to chain his memory, and he longed to see her again, as never had he longed to see a human face before.

"I shall only stay for a day and then go on to England," he told himself, and marvelled a little at the glad thrill that ran through his veins as he pictured the welcome of the woman whose image he could not banish. Mental disquietude had been a thing unknown to him till these last

few weeks, and therefore perhaps this fancy had taken all the stronger hold of his imagination, and grown into more vivid life with every thought that dwelt upon it.

It was no sacred pure-souled vision now. It was a feverish dream of a woman's loveliness—a restless longing for a woman's presence. Yet he would not have exchanged this fever and unrest for the sweetest hour of calm he had ever known.

Strange force of human passion that laughs at self-control! Strange madness that hugs its own chains and mocks at freedom; that holds its misery sweeter than all peace, and clings but closer to the thing that tortures it!

CHAPTER XIII.

You'd give him—poison shall we say?
Or what, Faustine!

CECIL CALVERLEY remained only long enough at his hotel to remove the dust of travel and take some necessary refreshment. Then he hastened to the presence of the woman whose memory had haunted him through those past weeks. She was at home, and he was shown into the boudoir where she had first received him. As she rose to greet him, as the loveliness that now seemed but greater and more irresistible met his eyes once more, he marvelled how he could ever have left her—ever have borne those weeks of silence and separation. For a moment he could find no words—he could only look at her and feel that life was paradise. She read his emotion plainly enough; she was quite calm herself.

She pointed to a seat beside her own. His sudden departure and complete silence had piqued and disturbed her more than she would have liked to acknowledge, but not for worlds would she have shown any curiosity respecting one or other.

"Welcome, monsieur," she said, with that smile that was like sunlight. "I had no idea you were in Paris."

"I have but just returned. I was called away some weeks ago on urgent business," answered Cecil. "I saw by the papers that you were acting again, madame."

"Yes; the damage to the theatre was soon repaired, and I resumed my engagement. By-the-way, I saw your friend, Lord Danvers, the other day. He had obtained some clue respecting Gaspard Ducroix, and was off to follow it up. But I suppose you know that."

"Yes; he wrote to me about it."

His thoughts were at variance with his words. The music of her voice had never seemed so sweet as now. He looked at her, and wondered no longer that men had gone mad for her smile. He was like one in enchantment, and ceremonies,

and customs, and conventionalities were all forgotten. Burning words rose to his lips—words which told of the lesson he had learnt in absence, and, while veiling love, yet betrayed it all too well.

She listened in silence, but her heart was moved as it had never been by any word of passion or remembrance. Yet she turned aside his meaning with the skill of one well used to fence with man's adoration.

"You honour me too much," she said. "I had not expected you would remember me. You left so suddenly—without a word. Yes; I know. You could not help it. We cannot always control circumstances. Still, I thought I had been long forgotten."

"That you cannot mean," said Cecil impulsively. "You must know that to forget you is a task beyond most men's strength."

"But you are no woman's slave; you have told me they are nothing to you."

"And they are—save only one," he said in a low voice. "She has condemned me to pay dearly for my previous heresies."

She laughed a little. "In what coin, monsieur?

Empty speech and idle compliment? They are too common to be of any value."

"That I can well believe," answered Cecil bitterly. "I suppose even the fact of such coin having been untendered hitherto to any living woman could not make it of any worth in your eyes."

"I think nothing is of any worth in my eyes," she said sadly, and her glance rested for a moment on the troubled face beside her. "I wish I could avoid the acknowledgment, but I cannot."

"It may not be so always," said Cecil impulsively. "Your life is not half lived yet. How can you tell that it will be always empty as you say? Or, indeed, if it be, the fault must lie with yourself."

"Perhaps it does. As I told you before, I live but for one purpose, and it has stamped upon my heart an endless bitterness. Its memory suffices to drive away all softness and womanly feeling. See how frank I am with you. I have not cared to spare any man yet. I have let him believe the best before I showed the worst. To you I have at least been honest. You know me

as I am. Is not that sufficient to drive me from your memory?"

"No; because I believe you magnify the evil and conceal the good. Your very frankness but appeals more strongly to my faith in you."

"Your faith in me!" she echoed, and a faint flush rose to her cheek as her eyes met his frank impetuous gaze. "Ah, heaven, to think that I should hear such words from any man's lips! What groundwork have you for such faith, my young Sir Galahad?"

Cecil coloured at the mocking words.

"It pleases you to jest, madame. I have never asked myself that question. I only know that I have spoken the simple truth."

Woman of the world as she was, those simple earnest words touched her profoundly. The smile left her lips—the coldness died out of her eyes. "You do me too much honour," she said gently. "I have not been accustomed to over much deference from men. Naturally I should not complain. A woman who lives in the glare of publicity must expect to have her name handled by every passing touch. She has no right to resent it. Of course not. The world says so, and the world

is always right—especially when it stones a woman."

"The world and I have little in common," said Cecil Calverley.

"No; you are too chivalrous, too trusting, and too careless of its doctrines, I should say. It may be the worse for you. Worldly wisdom is a good thing in its way. How is it we always drift into personalities—you and I?"

"For myself I can answer. My thoughts are too full of you to turn to indifferent subjects."

"I wish they were more worthily occupied," she said, with a sort of pitying compassion that chilled him more than her raillery had done.

"If I am satisfied, what matters the rest?" he said quickly. "They say we are not free agents in any matter—that action, life, thought, are all shaped and controlled for us by some governing and mysterious power. I cannot control my thoughts of you any more than I can account for the impulse that led me to the theatre that fatal night. Do not blame me, madame—blame fate."

"You believe in fate, then?"

"I do—now."

Her heart gave a quicker throb—her face grew troubled. "It would have been better if you had never seen me," she said involuntarily. "Whatever you believe can make no difference now. My life has passed into the shadow of calumny. I defy the world, and the world repays me in its own coin. I will not say that I am blameless. I am utterly indifferent and utterly reckless. I think sometimes of my youth, and shudder as I look on myself now. The dreams that I dreamt, the hopes that I hoped—alas! for them there is no resurrection!"

"Why talk of what might have been?" cried Cecil impatiently. "I have seen you—I have known you. Can anything alter those facts? Let the world think what it may, if you yourself know the world is wrong. As for me, your warning comes too late. Forget you, I cannot—avoid you I *will* not, unless it be your express command."

She grew very pale. It was almost a declaration of love, and what could love be to her now any more than to him? "I did not think you were so hot-headed, Mr. Calverley," she said somewhat coldly. "If you will be wise in time,

then take my warning. If you will not take it, do not blame me in the future for what I would willingly save you now. My friendship is rarely a welcome gift. Though between us lives ever the remembrance of the debt I owe you, I would almost you had sought its payment in any other way."

"I shall never blame you," said Cecil sadly. "I only ask that you will not cast me quite aside—that you will not forbid me your presence. Is that too presumptuous a request?"

"From you to me—no. But you remember too well. It is for that reason I would rather you asked me anything but this."

"If it be my own choice to risk the danger——?"

"Those are rash words. They do not suit you. Besides, you make me seem both vain and egotistical. Well, let us say no more on the matter. It shall be as you wish. Now I am going to dismiss you. I have a rehearsal to attend. Shall you be at the theatre this evening?"

"No," he said almost fiercely. "There, of all places, I hate to see you."

She lifted her eyebrows in faint surprise.

"Do not idealise me, whatever you do," she said ironically. "Believe me what I am to the world. It may not be my best side, but it is my truest."

"Nay, you do yourself injustice. Your best side is something different to that."

"We will not drift into another argument on the subject of myself," she answered lightly. "Then come to supper if you will not go to the theatre. I shall be alone to-night, except for Madame Bontoux."

"I shall be only too happy."

"Farewell, then," and she gave him her hand and smiled up into his eyes.

That smile went with him through the day.

CHAPTER XIV.

We wring from our souls their applicative strength.
E. B. Browning.

PÈRE JEROME was pacing up and down his velvet-hung sanctuary with a restless impatience that his calm, equable temperament rarely betrayed. As a rule, he was too well governed by self-deception, too accustomed to conceal feelings with that cloak of gentle indifference, to suffer any outward display of inward emotion to escape.

"She could not have played me false," he muttered. "No; she knows better than that. All these weeks and nothing done. The child a rival of a woman, and such a woman! It is incredible."

He threw himself down and leaned his cheek on his hand, pursuing his thoughts in silence, but with frowning brow. He was a singularly

handsome man, with the polished grace and courtly manners of a Church dignitary, and the patent of nobility that is given by a great and ancient race. He was wont to trace his descent from a princely recluse, who, wearied of the vanities and evils of Court life, had taken refuge in the seclusion of the sanctuary, and veiled his name under the patronymic of a monastical brotherhood.

Be that as it may, Père Jerome stood high in the estimation of his fraternity, and was accounted a singularly astute and valuable member of the church he served. He was a skilled diplomatist, an accomplished scholar, and a thoroughly delightful companion, but he had one weakness, and that was an unsparing hatred of the Earl of Strathavon's second son. From his boyhood upwards the priest had spared no pains to thwart his inclinations—to oppose his wishes—to fan the flame of his father's indifference into deeper dislike, and the fact of being met on all points by a spirit as immovable and self-controlled as his own only made him more determined to bend or break it.

The old Earl, indifferent as he was to Cecil,

had yet too stern a sense of justice to be quite as merciless to his heresies and eccentricities as his priestly adviser would have desired. Of any of his sons, Cecil was the least troublesome—the least extravagant; the one whose income was always sufficient for his expenses, and who had never appealed for payment of debts. He could find no fault in him save for vagrant wanderings and avoidance of society, and as his brothers amply atoned for deficiencies in that respect, Cecil met all rebuke and remonstrance with a laughing reminder that his allowance would not cover the demands of a yearly town season and its attendant expenses. There was so much truth in the statement that his father could only content himself with flinging a sarcasm at his vagabond tastes, and a hint that he had better not disgrace his family by a too great indulgence in them.

The quiet scorn of the eyes that met his own, the tranquil rejoinder: "Do not fear *that*," made the old Earl uncomfortable for long after his son had left his presence.

It was twelve months now since they had met, and he had confided to Père Jerome that Cecil had sent an intimation of his forthcoming

arrival, and was about to bring his friend Lord Danvers with him.

This was the news that had so disturbed the worthy priest. He always disliked Cecil's presence at the Castle, and Lord Danvers was equally objectionable to him.

Sitting there, in deep meditation—going over again and again schemes that Cecil Calverley had thwarted, plans that he had opposed, secrets that he had divined—no wonder Père Jerome's brow grew dark, no wonder that his eyes rested wrathfully on the perfumed note by his elbow, and the words which were written there: "I have failed to do your bidding. I cannot keep him."

"Women are poor tools at best," he muttered wrathfully, "though powerful enough in their way. One can never depend on them quite. I could almost think she was over-scrupulous for once. As a rule, she finds it no hard task to chain men to her side. Surely a boy—young, ardent, imaginative, chivalrous, as Cecil is, cannot have been quite untouched. The very fact of that romantic rescue should have sufficed to first attach him to her. For the rest—where has her power gone that she could not keep him?"

He sat down at his writing-table and wrote several letters; then rang a silver bell beside him, and inquired of the servant who answered the summons whether the Earl was ready to receive him.

Being answered in the affirmative, he took his way to Lord Strathavon's apartments; all the gloom and disturbance banished from his brow; the smiling, courteous suavity of mien and manner as undisturbed as usual. The old Earl was just recovering from a severe attack of gout, and lay on his couch in a very irritable and petulant frame of mind. Perhaps a visit from his lawyer had something to do with both, for that gentleman was folding up some ominous-looking parchments as the priest entered.

"Ah, it is you, father," said the Earl; "pray be seated. I have just finished with Mr. Falkener. Infernal worry these business matters."

"I am extremely sorry to have been compelled to trouble you, my lord," said the lawyer apologetically; "but it was necessary to have your signature, and——"

"Yes, yes, I know," interposed the Earl petulantly, and waving his hand as a sign of

dismissal. "You will find luncheon prepared for you in the morning-room, Mr. Falkener; and pray, don't trouble me about leases and mortgages for a long time to come."

The lawyer bowed himself out of the room. Père Jerome looked quickly up. The word "mortgages" struck on his ear with an unpleasant sound.

"It is Malden's extravagance again," said the Earl gloomily, as he found himself alone with his spiritual adviser. "I wish he would marry. There is Lady Fortescue and her quarter of a million simply waiting for his asking, and he won't ask. What does it matter if she is a widow, and not over young? The money will be our salvation just now; but those sons of mine are as obstinate as mules. My wishes go for nothing. You know, of course, that Cecil comes home to-night?"

"Yes, my lord. He brings Lord Danvers also, does he not?"

"Yes. I don't know what makes them choose such a time for their visit. They might just as well have waited for the shooting season, when we should have had the house full. As it is, they

will have to console themselves with each other's company."

"Does Mr. Cecil propose making a long stay?"

"He does not say. I should scarcely fancy he would. I mean to ask him about this foundling of his when I see him."

"Do you think it wise, my lord? Mr. Cecil objects to having his actions interfered with. You know that of old."

The Earl laughed scornfully. "I can dispense with your counsels on that subject, holy father. I will manage my sons in my own fashion."

"Pardon me. I never meant to advise you on that point, my lord. I know that Mr. Cecil is always ready to confide in you, and more inclined to listen to your advice than either of his brothers."

"Cecil is a fool," muttered the old Earl savagely. "Keep him out of my way as much as you can. He always irritates me with his democratic ideas and ultra-Liberalism. As for his passion for art and craze for painting, Heaven only knows how he has come by them, or how long the whim is to last."

"If his views are liberal his fancies are

patrician," remarked Père Jerome thoughtfully. "He is proud enough of his race and scrupulous enough of his honour, at all events. Let me see, it is twelve months since he was here, is it not?"

"Yes; but why speak of him so much? I want to consult you about Malden. It is imperative that he should marry, and that soon. Can you not use your influence with him? I would go up to London myself, only my health renders it impossible. What do you say to being my ambassador?"

"Willingly, my lord. But if I might advise, I should say invite Lady Fortescue here in the sporting season. There is nothing like throwing people together in a country mansion. They see so much more of each other than they can in the whirl of the season, and Lord Malden is always at his best, I think, when playing the host at Strathavon. Meanwhile I will pave the way and—ascertain that there is no one else."

"Heavens! I hope not," exclaimed the Earl abruptly. "You have not heard anything of that sort, have you?"

"Only vague rumours—nothing that you need

distress yourself about, my lord," said the priest soothingly. "But as there is no smoke without fire, I may as well investigate into the cause of the former. Rest assured I will let you know if there is any reason for anxiety."

The conversation then turned to other matters, and after half-an-hour or so of further discussion, the priest retired to his own apartments.

It wanted half-an-hour of dinner-time when Cecil Calverley and Lord Danvers arrived at the Castle. The meeting between father and son was scarcely warmer than if they had parted an hour before, instead of, as in reality, a year. The dinner would have been but a dull affair save for Père Jerome's unwearied efforts to banish the somewhat taciturn element that was only too apparent.

The Earl looked gloomy and dissatisfied. Cecil was visibly preoccupied and ill at ease, Lord Danvers unusually silent, and the priest alone seemed thoroughly at home and unconstrained. It was a relief to all when the stately meal was at last over, and the two young men rose from the table and went out on the terrace to smoke their cigars. Cecil's was a poor pretence of enjoying the fragrant weed. His eyes rested with a

half-regretful pleasure on the beautiful scene before him, on the sloping terraces, the aisles of woodland, the wide-stretching deer forests, the glimpses of fertile country, the far-off curve of the coast rocks that held the sea thundering at their base. A grand place—a noble heritage indeed, and with all his restlessness and love of change Cecil Calverley felt that no spot on earth was, after all, so dear as this, his boyhood's home.

Lord Malden cared very little for it; had no enthusiastic reverence for the magnificent Gothic pile with its battlements, towers, and fretted pinnacles, and history of mingled recklessness, and chivalry, and romance. He preferred the town house in Park Lane, he was wont to say, to all the stately grandeur of Strathavon, and only tolerated the Castle during the brief shooting months, when the whirl of the season was over, and he was perforce obliged to leave his beloved modern Babylon. But Cecil loved his home in a very different fashion, and his brother's indifference was often a source of displeasure and uneasiness both.

"How silent you are, Cecil!" remarked his friend at last. "Not one observation for the

last five minutes. Haven't you exhausted your admiration yet?"

"You forget how long I have been absent," answered Cecil apologetically. "After all, foreign lands can show us nothing nobler in their way than these 'stately homes of England.'"

"I agree with you there. Still, they are a trifle dull to live in for long, don't you think?"

"You heretic! Can one never raise you to a moment's forgetfulness of mere selfish advantages?" laughed Cecil.

"*Cui bono?*" asked Lord Danvers with a shrug of his shoulders. "One must live; and as one can only live once, it is best to get as much benefit out of things in general as might or right can secure. Selfish, perhaps, but wise, all the same. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Cecil with a faint sigh. "Humanity is all more or ess selfish."

"Naturally. We can't avoid it. No one will trouble to look after us if we don't look after ourselves. To do the best for oneself is really a virtue, if you only look at it in the right way. I am more material than yourself, as you know,

and life is an infinitely more prosaic thing than your dreams would make of it; believe that."

"Yet you have had your romance?"

"To my cost—yes. Perhaps that is why I see no charm in anything or anyone now. I cannot tell. I suppose you do *enjoy* more than I do. You see so much, and fancy so much, and idealise so much. But to neither of us, I suppose, will there come content. I am ambitious, you——"

"Well; why do you pause?" laughed Cecil. "I am *not*. Is that it?"

"Not exactly. I was wondering whether you also had not set yourself some goal to reach. Life will not be always a dream to you."

"Indeed, I hope not. It is scarcely that now."

"I fancy there is a difference about you, somehow," remarked Lord Danvers. "You have changed in some way. I can't explain how. I noticed it when we met in London. What were you doing with yourself in Paris after your philanthropic mission was over?"

The dusky evening light hid the sudden flush that rose to Cecil's cheek. He laughed, but the laugh was uncertain and mirthless.

"What should I have been doing? Finishing the copy of my picture, and roaming about the Bois and Boulevards, abjuring fashionable society and revelling in untrammelled freedom."

"Yes; that is what I should have expected. Did you go and see our friend Faustine at the —— Theatre? She is acting again."

"Thanks, no. One edition of that nonsense was enough for me. As your cigar is done, Danvers, suppose we adjourn to my 'den.' I sent over a lot of things from abroad awhile ago, and I want your opinion about arranging them."

"With all my heart. That artistic sanctum of yours is my *beau idéal* of a room. I wish mine at Calsthorpe could be induced to look like it."

And Lord Danvers followed his friend into the "den" alluded to with a careless laugh on his lips.

There may be unbounded confidence between two men until just so long as a woman has no influence over one or other. It is more rare for men to give their love confidences than for women. The feminine mind is essentially one that craves for sympathy in matters touching

the heart, and few, indeed, are the instances where it would keep solely and entirely to itself the history of a conquest, or the sweetness of a love-secret.

Cecil Calverley had not breathed a word to Lord Danvers of his renewed acquaintance with Faustine; had said nothing of those enchanting suppers, those morning *tête-à-tête* with which that week of his stay in Paris had been filled. Nothing either of the passion that had stolen upon him unawares, until his life now seemed a sweet, wild, tumultuous dream, filled with the smiles and words and memory of but one woman. It was a siren's spell lulling his senses, yet with the vague fear of an awaking ever present. At times he felt restless and dissatisfied and vaguely distrustful of her. At other moments the sadness and melancholy that breathed through her words and threw their shadow over the outward brilliance of her life, only appealed more forcibly to him by reason of that very distrust.

Words of love she would not listen to, though she knew they were for ever burning on his lips, and only restrained by severe effect. Careless

as she was of the world, and what it chose to say, Cecil Calverley could not but see that she was too proud and too disdainful of all men to really merit the reputation that world gave her.

"No man has ever had the power to move me," she told him once, with that cool, negligent grace which so often chilled him in her presence. "I think in my own heart I despise them too much!"

A far vainer and more experienced man than Cecil Calverley would have been puzzled and doubtful of his own power or of her meaning, and would have felt, as Cecil did, that his admission to her presence and her gracious friendliness were not by any means sure ground on which to base the smallest hope. A week of such intoxication had bound her chains more surely round him. Then he had been forced to leave her, and she had not uttered any regret, or by word or look bidden him to stay. Only at parting, when something of his pain had betrayed itself in a passionate entreaty to seek her again when his visit to England was over, she had answered, "You are too loyal for the

age you live in—the world in which we move. Go home and forget me; it is the wisest thing you can do—indeed I mean it."

"If forgetfulness was impossible before, what is it now?" asked Cecil sadly. "Your warning comes too late."

There are few warnings of which *that* may not be said.

And this was the woman who had written to Père Jerome: "I cannot keep him."

CHAPTER XV.

For my heart is set
On what hurts me, I know not why.
Swinburne.

CECIL CALVERLEY'S "den" was indeed worthy of his friend's admiring appreciation.

It was a large room with an immense bay window, commanding a fine view of the park and the great woods beyond. A square of Turkey carpet lay on the oak floor, a few Eastern rugs made spots of rich colouring here and there. Over the mantel-board of embossed leather was a large mirror in a rich carved oak frame. The great tiled fireplace beneath was filled with ferns and grasses. A grand piano stood in one corner, with piles of music beside it. A few deep, softly-cushioned lounging-chairs were scattered about. Rare bronzes stood on the chimney-piece and on the dark oaken brackets on the wall.

The drapery of the windows was of rich dark maroon plush, which now looked almost brown in the mellow gleam of the lamplight. The subdued tints of the room were relieved by a few exquisite water-colours on the wall, and some great bronze jars of ferns which stood on an oaken console-table in the embrasure of the windows. A large easel was resting in the corner. A table near by was littered with portfolios of sketches, uncut novels and papers, and on another smaller table was a liqueur-stand, and an array of cut-glass bottles and tumblers.

A few marbles, perfect in their way, gleamed here and there among the more sober tones of colouring; a great bowl of flowers stood on the piano, filling the air with fragrance, and in the careless arrangements and picturesque litter was just that element of untidiness which is essentially manlike, and gave a look of comfort and "livableness" to the whole room.

Cecil looked round it and smiled, well satisfied.

"Melford has done his work I see," he remarked, as his eyes rested on the flowers, and the glittering array of glass, and piles of purple grapes, and cool, sparkling lumps of ice in their

silver pails. "It is like the old days again, is it not, Vere?"

"Yes," answered his friend, throwing himself down on one of the inviting-looking chairs, and proceeding to light a cigar. "Dear old days! What jolly times we used to have here, Cis!"

"If time would only stand still," half sighed Cecil, as he also drew up a chair to the open window and gazed out on the moonlit beauty of leafage, and the wavering shadows that fell athwart the smooth green turf. "We really don't know that we are happy as the moment passes on. Afterwards—when we look back——"

"Heyday, Cecil! What has come to you? Look back. You have not had to do that yet, surely?"

"No, no; of course not," laughed Cecil; but the laugh was somewhat embarrassed, and he did not meet his friend's eyes. "Fine effect that moonlight on the avenue. I feel inclined to make a sketch of it."

"Queer people, you artists," murmured Lord Danvers lazily. "Always thinking of effects. Nature seems to play the part of a perpetual

model to you. Doesn't that constant desire for reproduction spoil a good deal of your enjoyment?"

"I don't find it so. Art speaks to us of Nature and Nature of Art. They go hand in hand, beautifying and glorifying each other. The desire for reproduction, as you term it, is more like an involuntary utterance of the admiration and enthusiasm within, than the wish to make that admiration subservient to the skill of a copyist."

"Not badly put," said Lord Danvers, helping himself to the sparkling wine beside him. "But my experience of your fraternity is simply what I have stated. The grandest or simplest or most picturesque piece of Nature's handiwork serves only to awaken the impulse to reproduce it. Such a feeling must lessen the simple effortless appreciation which only feeds itself on the beauty it sees, and is content."

"But its appreciation is not so keen, and its memory is but brief."

"Well, to the outsiders who are ignorant of the science and execution of Art, the admiration of the moment is quite sufficient. I almost envy that class of persons who enjoy what is on the surface, and—ask no more."

A very stunted existence at best," said Cecil gravely. "I have heard of 'the bleak horror of fruitless days.' The people you speak of must own that experience, I should imagine."

"But to them the days would not be bleak or fruitless. Who feels the loss of what they never possessed? The sublimest philosophy is to enjoy and 'ask not wherefore.'"

"And would you call that enjoyment which looks on Art and sees no hidden meaning; which gazes at the wonders of Nature and reads in them no deeper lesson; to which all that appealed to the soul was stifled in the channels of materialism; and to which the utterance of Divine truths and the sublimity of genius were alike incomprehensible; where all the colour and beauty and fulness and fragrance of 'mind life' could find no entrance and excite no wonder? Why, it is a prostitution of the name to so apply it!"

"I like to warm you up to a pitch of enthusiasm," smiled Lord Danvers. "When will you be convinced that in the world such individuals as yourself are the exception, not the rule? High falutin doesn't pay, and art is all very well so long as you haven't to make a living out of it. In plain

words, my dear Cecil, it is better to have a big balance at your banker's than the intellect of a Chatterton or the genius of a Schubert. Cultivate the intellect and the genius by all means, if nature has served you so ill a turn as to dower you with one or other; but don't expect that all the rest of the world will stop to listen to your verses or admire your music; and don't call it ungrateful if it deems transfers and shares and Stock Exchange speculations of tenfold more importance! Humanity is very material, and you can't alter it, preach how you may. Now you are fortunate; you choose to pursue Art in a *dilettante* fashion, and find yourself crowned as famous. You are not dependent on Fortune, therefore she smiles on you. You can live in luxury, and work at your ease, and enjoy every artistic delight that the world can give. But for one person placed as you are, there must be hundreds to whom the bondage of genius is the curse of life, who are fettered and curbed at every point by the sordid needs of that material essence you despise, and are no more free to make life what they would, than the veriest slave who crouches under the lash of a merciless taskmaster."

"Yet better that than the mere mediocrity

which is so dull and easily satisfied, and so sleek and well-fed. If suffering too often be the artist's lot, it is through suffering alone he has taught his grandest lessons. Despair is a greater master than Content, and it is rare that the highest wages have repaid the highest achievements."

"They learn in suffering what they teach in song," murmured Lord Danvers musingly. "Ah, poor Shelley! through what bitterness and weariness did he wade ere he made those words immortal! I always think poets are a class to be intensely pitied; and, after all, in their way they are as mad as any inmate of Bedlam. The maniac says to the world, 'I am an Emperor,' and believes it. The poet tells of the winds that speak and the flowers that whisper—that where we see a cloud is an angel's face, or a river of emerald. He hears voices in earth, and air, and water, and calls on the rest of humanity to hear them also; he sees divinity in a face that is simply mortal, and marvels the world does not also worship. We might just as well say, 'There are no voices; that is no divinity,' as we tell the poor lunatic 'You are no emperor.' The one hugs his paper crown, and is convinced he is right; the other

—well, the other smiles pityingly on his fellow-beings and says: 'You are deaf and blind; I alone can hear and see!'"

"You most prosaic and cynical of reasoners!" laughed Cecil. "Go and give me some music, and leave Art alone. There at least you can forget to be utterly sceptical and material. It is long since I have heard you sing; it will be a treat. If to your idea Poetry is only 'misrepresentation,' at least Music, its twin-sister, is something better and different, else whence comes the passion you put into song, and the meaning that notes and harmonies convey?"

"Music is greater than any poetry," said Lord Danvers, sauntering slowly over to the piano as he spoke.

"But is sooner forgotten," said Cecil quickly. "Few melodies, however beautiful, can haunt one's mind or waken such a train of thought as one sweet subtle utterance of a poet will do. Besides, music may mean so much to one, so little to another. It is more the mind that receives it, than the utterance itself that is of importance. Sound is vague in comparison with words, you must acknowledge that. You mock at the poet

for seeing a river in a cloud, or hearing voices in the wind, or music in the stream, or divinity where all is mortal, but what of the musician who says this passage represents sorrow or joy, or anguish or death, a storm or a calm, a moonlight night or a winter's day. Given the phrase to an audience unaware of its intended meaning, how many could interpret it aright, do you think?"

"Just as many as would comprehend the meaning of a picture or the subtleties of a poem," laughed his friend. "Of course all art demands a certain amount of education before it can be appreciated, and too often demands it in vain. Still, I think music appeals more directly than poetry. The most illiterate, the most depraved, the most commonplace people will often evince unbounded delight at the one and be utterly untouched by, or incapable of comprehending, the other. Music speaks in a universal tongue—poetry in an exceptional one. Both are beautiful—divine if you will—but where one is felt by a million hearts the other is understood by scarce a hundred minds. And, after all, as feeling rules the world more powerfully than understanding,

the musician has the advantage of the poet, just as the painter has of the sculptor. Marble is cold in comparison to colour. It may be grander, more perfect, more majestic, but it *appeals* less powerfully to sight and sense.

Then, to close the argument, he sat down at the great Broadwood, and soon his rich baritone voice was filling the room with melody as he poured out the music of a grand opera given to the Parisian world that season.

Cecil Calverley sat by the window and listened —the quiet moonlight silvering all the sward— the gleam of starshine resting on the masses of foliage. An hour like this he had been wont to enjoy often in his friend's company; good-natured argument, combated prejudices, and such music as well-trained talent of no common order could pour out from the treasure-house of memory. Lord Danvers rarely looked at notes. He had a vast acquaintance with both classical and modern composers, and would play and sing by the hour together, once the fancy seized him. In this quiet hour, with Cecil for his only listener, he poured out such glorious melodies as no drawing-room audience could ever have persuaded him to

give for all their smiles and beseeching. But his listener's thoughts were far away for once —had crossed the seas and mists of the Channel, and flown to the presence of a woman whose mirthful laugh was ringing at that moment across a delighted crowd, whose graceful figure floated through the mazes of the dance; yet who, even while her light feet glided over the stage, was saying in her heart, "Does he remember still?"

He did remember—only too well; but that she could not know.

A tall dark figure, pacing up and down the terrace, saw that absorbed face by the open window in the mingled glow of light from within and without the room; saw it, and came nearer and nearer, unobserved by the eyes that were gazing far away beyond the silver leaves and falling shadows.

And as the priest stood beneath the window and watched that thoughtful profile, and noted the dreaming far-off look in the upturned eyes, he smiled softly to himself, saying, "Is it of her he thinks?"

"I have been enjoying the music, Mr. Cecil," he said aloud. "What a night, is it not, and the

music suits it. The scene is perfect, I think—at least to me. Doubtless for you it needs another attraction."

"And what may that be?" asked Cecil, looking coldly down on his arch-enemy, and little thankful for the interruption to his thoughts.

"A woman's presence," said Père Jerome softly. "Moonlight and music—what are they without the charm of sweet lips and soft eyes?"

Cecil's face grew scarlet.

"I should scarcely have expected to hear such a sentiment from you, holy father," he said coldly.

The priest laughed—his slow suave laugh. "My habit teaches self-denial, and preaches against worldly vanities; but I do not forget what life is to youth, and such youth as yours. Artistic, fanciful, poetic—full of dreams that are divine, and visions that are glorious. Yet would you know a beauty fairer than dreams—visions more glorious than art can imagine—a life perfected as it has never been yet, live out the magic of such a night as this, with all its glory mirrored back only by two eyes that love you, and

all the rapture of existence breathed out on lips that rest upon your own."

The words, blending in unison with the burning thoughts of his own mind, the impassioned memories of the last week, the lingering echoes of the music's dying strains, fired Cecil's blood to fever heart, and stifled his anger with their insidious tempting.

He could not speak, though a thousand thoughts were thronging to his brain; the tumultuous ecstasy, the subtle tempting of those words thrilled to the very core of his heart, and brought back to memory the face and fascinations of the woman he believed he loved.

He forgot the priest. He thought no more of answering his words; he only heard them silently, with that flush on his cheek, that nameless, passionate longing in his heart. He knew what the magic of the night wanted, what the music lacked, what had left his life incomplete, and with the sigh that spent itself on the silence, he woke from his trance of delirium, and found his friend by his side.

As Vere Danvers' hand touched his arm he shook it off impatiently. As his laughing voice

reached his ears, he answered it with ill-concealed petulance. Never before had the perfect accord of their friendship been disturbed. Never before had Cecil Calverley felt that Lord Danvers' presence was a restraint. But, then, never before had stood between him and his friend the shadow of—a woman's presence.

Book II.

CHAPTER I.

CONFIDENCES AND MISTRUST.

To most men it would have seemed that Strathavon at this season of the year—with no guests at the Castle, no sport in the woods, only the somewhat unexciting pastime of fishing, and their own company in the billiard and music-room—was dull, to say the least of it. Yet neither Cecil nor Vere appeared to find it so.

They had come for a rest, they both declared laughingly; and a rest they seemed to have. Lazy saunterings through the lonely woods; mornings spent with rod and line; long rides through the surrounding country; evenings given up to music and the bantering, cynical arguments they both delighted in; theological discussions with Père Jerome, who exerted himself on every occasion to amuse and entertain, and showed himself in

so agreeable a light to Lord Danvers that he declared Cecil had been prejudiced against the worthy father, and that neither horn nor hoof could be concealed beneath the good-natured courtesy and gracious frankness of the confessor's manner.

A week had drifted by like this, when another attack of gout confined the Earl to his chamber, and threw the two young men more entirely together. It was then that Lord Danvers began to discover a certain restlessness and irritability in Cecil's manner that was certainly foreign to his experience.

He marvelled at it, even as he had marvelled on that night of their arrival, when the first petulant reproach he had ever heard from Cecil's lips had answered his laughing inquiry as to the nature of his dreams in the starlight. But to ask for a confidence withheld was a thing he could never have done; and he made no remark, only waited until his friend should himself explain an alteration so sudden and self-evident.

Cecil, however, said nothing. He was not himself aware that there was such an alteration, or, at least, that it was apparent. Certainly there

were times when solitude was sweeter to him than either converse or amusement, but he never gave outward expression to the feeling, and so deemed it unknown.

There are times when, like the bird of the desert, we blind ourselves and deem that we are unseen of others; and at no time is this folly so apparent as in the earliest stage of a first passion.

For the first time in his life Cecil Calverley had something to conceal, and concealment was foreign to his frank open temperament. He was thankful that Lord Danvers asked nothing of that week in Paris; and yet, looking back on it, it seemed as if there was nothing to conceal. Such frank intercourse, such languid indifference, such a sure but unspoken restraint laid like a chain on any impulsive utterance that his lips longed to breathe, such gracious acceptance of his courtesies, such hours of enchantment brilliant with the wit and grace and talent of this one woman—that was all. Enough to bewilder himself, enough to have made that week a paradise; yet nothing to look back upon with any hope, nothing that could lay to rest his vague doubts,

or in any way frame his enchantress into his ideal portrait of womanhood.

In these days of absence he thought of her much and often, but there was no comfort in those thoughts, no peace in those bewildering memories. If she had divined his loves he had also fostered it as only a thorough coquette could have done; and he knew from her own words that this was how she dealt with all men—that caprice alone ruled her life, and revenge repaid her lovers. He hated himself that he had disregarded her own warning—that, like the moth, he had fluttered to the flame, scorching himself in its lustre as sole payment of his folly.

"Alas! my dreams!" he muttered to himself now, with no less sad a regret than she had felt as she had breathed the same words.

In solitude he saw his madness more clearly. What was there in this love honourable or hopeful? What—even supposing he might move her heart—could this woman be to him? The answer was clear enough and plain enough for even his eyes to read; but, ah! when did ever so plain a reading of love's sweet folly suffice to banish its remembrance or ease its pain?

"I will see her no more," he told himself, and even as he told it his heart was longing for her presence; his ears were hungry for the faintest sound of her voice; his eyes, that looked out on earth, and stars, and sky, saw nothing of their beauty or their lustre, for both alike were dimmed by the loveliness of a human face.

No wonder that, with such feelings burning in his heart, waking to keen regret and fresh-given pain with every sight and sound of art and nature, he found it no easy task to be his usual frank careless self, to blind his friend's eyes, because he dared not ask his sympathy, or betray his own folly.

A woman whose reputation the world's scorn had tossed to and fro—of whom it spoke with a smile and adored with a homage that was degradation—a woman who had herself acknowledged that the passions of men's lives, the ardour of their worship, were alike instruments for an ignoble vengeance—what could such a woman be worth, even though her gratitude should ripen into love as wild and fervent as his own? What indeed?

It did not bear thinking of; it was an infatuation that defied calm sense or cool reasoning, and

yet there it was, regardless of both, eating his heart out in fierce despair and wild longing and tumultuous pain; a thing he loved and hated, despised and feared; yet a thing that was all his life, whose shadow fell across its sunlight, whose memory held every thought in a bondage that laughed to scorn the philosophies and creeds of his past, and cried to Reason, "I am your master —now."

Yet, if the world were wrong, if lovers and friends were ignorant of the real nature of the woman they alternately scourged and worshipped, might not there be something in her more noble than they dreamed—a greatness of which they knew nothing?

The thought swept across his mind as lightly and tenderly as the breath of the wind that fanned his brow in those woodland solitudes where he had wandered. It was sweet, subtle, and dangerous, for it lent her a sorcery greater than her beauty—a sympathy that outrivalled her fascinations.

"Oh, my love, my love, to know you worthy!" he cried despairingly. "What would matter my own pain then?"

If Faustine could have heard those words she would have known that for the first time in all her brilliant, capricious, triumphant life she was *worthily* loved.

"Where have you buried yourself all this lovely afternoon?" asked Lord Danvers, some two hours later, as he met Cecil sauntering homewards through the park. "Ah! been sketching, I see. What have you done?"

"Nothing worth showing," answered Cecil, holding back his portfolio.

It was no woodland scene or forest glade that his pencil had traced there. Only a face, perfect in its loveliness, proud in its sovereignty—a face with a Circe's beauty, yet a Magdalene's compassion; and under it was written the name he loathed and hated for its false meaning and its recklessly borne significance—the name of "Faustine!"

"You are growing lazy, Cis," resumed his friend banteringly. "This is not the first time that you have spent hours in solitude with apparently nothing to show for them. I shall imagine you have discovered some woodland

divinity, and are employing her as a model. You might show me your sketch, if only as proof or —refutation."

"Nonsense!" murmured Cecil, looking uncomfortable. "Sylvan divinities are not in my line; you know that."

"True," said Lord Danvers, pausing a moment to light his cigar. "By-the-way, Cis, I have had a letter from that French detective this morning. I wanted to consult you about it."

"The fellow that sent you off on that last wild-goose chase? Between ourselves, Vere, I have not much opinion of him."

"He says," went on Lord Danvers, unheeding his friend's remark, "that a man answering Ducroix's description——"

"For the *third* time," remarked Cecil *en parenthèse.*

"Don't interrupt; it's bad form. Well, that such a man has been traced to a little *auberge* near the Italian frontier, a little out-of-the-way-place enough. This man came there at night with *one* child and disappeared next day, leaving it behind to the care of an Italian who was travelling with a troupe of strolling players."

"But our friend had two children with him," remarked Cecil.

"Yes; that is what makes me doubtful on the point."

"Well, I should certainly wait for more authentic information before rushing off in pursuit again," said Cecil. "You know the last clue ended in nothing. I think detectives are great fools. They will try and make circumstances fit into their own opinions of a case, instead of shaping those opinions to circumstances. A detective who starts with a preconceived idea of who his 'man' is and what he will do, is about as much use as a beetle. And I told you from the beginning your official had done that."

"He was highly recommended," said Lord Danvers thoughtfully.

"Maybe," answered Cecil. "But he has not displayed any great brilliance yet, as far as I can see. My opinion is that he is persistently following a wrong clue. It is always a man with *one* child who turns up. You can't get over the fact of there being two."

"You are right there. Oh Cis," he added bitterly, "you have no idea how this affair weighs

on my mind. It seems horrible to think I am so baffled—that I, who would give my right hand to fulfil my darling's last wish, am so helpless in the matter!"

"Time and patience will assist you; nothing else," said Cecil gravely. "Of course it would be a satisfaction to know what has become of the children; but you could really do nothing for them, however much you desired it. You know that."

"The brute might be bribed," said Lord Danvers bitterly. "He would do anything for money—sell his soul, I believe. I wish to heaven I could find him!"

"We seem destined to be saddled with other people's children," said Cecil, laughing a little. "What am I to do with my waif when she grows up? Can you advise me there?"

"Make her a nun," answered Lord Danvers quickly. "Safest thing for a woman situated as she will be. You can't give her name, position, and birthright; you can hardly adopt her without scandal. She will have no claim on you save the charity that the world calls an insult from one of our sex to one of hers. You must do

one of two things—have her trained to servitude, or bind her to the seclusion of the sisterhood in whose care she is."

"I would rather see her dead than condemned to the life of a nun!" exclaimed Cecil hotly. "What! sacrifice her youth, rob her of all the glories of life, the empire of womanhood—never! It would be the act of a murderer."

"Apprentice her to a trade, then."

"My dear Vere—a trade! Preposterous! She is of gentle birth, undoubtedly, and as beautiful as the day."

"Well, my dear boy, you asked my advice, and I share the usual fate of people who give that unwelcome article. See, it was petitioned without the slightest intention of being taken. Seriously, I fear your waif will be a little troublesome to you in the future. What a pity it was not a boy, or low-born, or ugly! As it is——"

"What an ominous pause!" laughed Cecil. "She is none of these. But, after all, why should I trouble about the matter? Fate, which threw her in my way, will also doubtless provide for her. I am responsible for saving her life, and therefore must do my best for it. For a

few years at least she is in safe keeping; she will be cared for, guarded, educated. Then—well, something will be sure to turn up by that time."

"Her rightful owners, perhaps," remarked Lord Danvers ironically. "Having had her brought up, fed, clothed, and educated free of charge, doubtless they will come forward generously to claim and make use of her."

"Don't be sarcastic, Vere. God knows what unfeeling brute—man or woman—left the child to perish in that wood. I shall never forget the sight of the little cold, numbed thing, and how she clung to me."

"Terrible omen," murmured Lord Danvers, shaking his head with pathetic regret. "I hope you will never repent your philanthropy, my dear boy. Charity is its own reward, don't they say? Like most aphorisms, it applies itself to circumstances with a virtuous disregard of attendant inconvenience. But charity or not, a lover of freedom like yourself should never have bound your life by any tie. Take my word for it, you will find it a mistake."

"But what could I have done?"

"Made her over to the parish, or sent her to the Foundling Hospital; either would have saved her life equally well, and left yours free."

"Oh, nonsense, Vere; you look at it too seriously. She doesn't interfere with me so much."

"Time proves all things," said Lord Danvers coolly, "except—a woman's faith, or gratitude for benefits. I am not blaming you for what you have done, mind; only, when you talk of your waif growing up to womanhood, it does look as if your office of benefactor might be somewhat onerous."

"'Sufficient unto the day,'" quoted Cecil, throwing himself down on a lovely mound of moss, green as an emerald's hue, soft as only woodland moss can be. A great beech threw its shade over their heads, the babble of a stream made music in the silence, and the sunbeams fell like golden rain among the fresh green leaves and interlacing boughs.

Lord Danvers followed his friend's example, and stretched his massive limbs in lazy content on that natural couch.

"Lovely spots you have here," he remarked.

"One never seems to exhaust them. I don't think I have found my way here before. Well, to return to our subject. Has Père Jerome ever alluded to that *rencontre* in the woods, since you came here?"

"You mean when I found the child? No. Why do you ask?"

"Only because I think it singular if he hasn't. Apart from natural curiosity, I should say the fact of his having directed you to the retreat, or home, or whatever the place is, where you left the child, would have given him an interest in the little one's welfare."

"He is an odd being. There is no comprehending him," murmured Cecil lazily. "I am surprised you seem to get on so well with him, Vere. What do you talk about?"

"Theology, of course; points of doctrine, rituals, and Church ceremonies. What else should we discuss?"

"Is he trying to convert you?"

"Not that I am aware of. I fear it would be waste of time. Like yourself, I am intolerant of priestly governance. There is infinitely more harm done to religion by religion's administrators

than by infidels or even atheists. Christ's teaching was as simple as His life. We never hear of His being a stickler for ceremonies and feasts, and loud professions and active persecution. No; those improvements on the sublimity of the Christian religion sprang from the men who preached its doctrines for their own aggrandisement and benefit, their own power and pomp. Yet say this to any dignitary of the Church, whatever be the creed he holds, and how inexpressibly shocked he becomes. Contumacy is of course a deadly sin—none worse. Père Jerome, for all his silken courtesies, is the last man to forget that. Cecil, the more I see of him, the more convinced I am that your life will never own a bitterer foe."

His voice was impressive and earnest, but distinct enough to reach the ears of the very man of whom he spoke.

The priest was sauntering slowly through the park, book in hand, when the sound of voices broke on his ear. Involuntarily he paused among the beechen shadows, and an evil light came into his eyes. The faint cruel smile of a conqueror's amusement stole to his lips.

Cecil spoke now.

"I know that," he said tranquilly; "but I am not afraid. All the wiles of priestcraft cannot do much harm nowadays. He has certainly embittered my father against me; but then he never has shown me much affection. As for the rest, what can it matter? Malden is the heir, and his faith is all right—so far, at least, as outward observances go. I am of little importance."

"How do you know that?" asked Lord Danvers. "There are such things as accidents. Supposing Malden didn't marry, and predeceased yourself; what then? Père Jerome and his *confrères* would miss a goodly slice of Strathavon and its emoluments, I fancy."

The quiet listener's face grew darker. His hand closed more tightly on the bough which he held aside in order to catch the sound of those unconscious voices.

"Oh, nonsense!" murmured Cecil carelessly. "*That* is not probable. We are a long-lived family, and Malden has never had a day's illness."

"But he is reckless and wild."

"So are most of our race, and yet we come

into our kingdom in due course. Are you training for diplomacy, Vere, that you first conciliate your foe and then betray him? You and Father Jerome have seemed the best of friends lately; now you are reawakening all my old prejudices respecting him."

"The only weapon with which to foil cunning is cunning," said Lord Danvers. "I have been looking after your interests, my boy, because you are too frank and unsuspecting to do that for yourself. I believe—nay, I am almost certain —that the priest has told your father all about the little waif; and more, that he has implanted a doubt in the Earl's mind respecting your interest in the child."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Cecil, his face flushing hotly. "Why, in Heaven's name, should he do that?"

"To suit some purpose of his own, I suppose. He may have many that we do not suspect. Has your father said anything to you on the subject?"

"Not a word."

"Well, that is no proof that my suspicions are wrong."

CHAPTER II.

A sense of heavy harmonies
Grew on the growth of patient night,
More sweet than shapen music is.

In the obscure little Italian village where Già lived the little slaves he had purchased had but a toilful and most bitter existence.

The training was arduous and severe, and never relieved by word of kindness or encouragement from the taskmaster. Two of the children were orphans, and their only living relatives had been glad enough to sign that warrant of slavery which Già termed apprenticeship, and to get rid of an obnoxious charge. Quità knew nothing of how or why she had been brought thither. She had been torn from her home in another land, and drugged with anodynes, till suddenly her stupefied senses awoke to the fact that the peace, and freedom, and carelessness of childhood were

over—that scanty clothing and coarse food, and incessant railing and blows, and hours of laborious exercise were all that could replace them. She bore all with a fortitude and patience strangely at variance with her years, deeming it a law of nature that she should suffer, even as the more fortunate of her age and sex think it a law of life that they should enjoy. Of knowledge she had none, and might never have had any save for one happy chance that broke across the dull and wearisome path of her life, like a sunbeam on dark waters.

It happened thus.

Già one night brought a friend home with him—an old bent man who had some past claim on his memory or interest, otherwise he would never have crossed that inhospitable threshold. He carried slung on his back an old blackened violin, a time-worn treasure of his own that never left his side, and always seemed part and parcel of himself to those who knew him. Ere they supped, Già summoned the children and bade them dance, while he played. They went through all the mazy evolutions, the graceful gliding motions, the aerial flights and *pas* and *pirouettes*

they had learned so laboriously, and when they had done he bade Quità dance alone.

"I will play for her," said the old musician.

And play he did, in heavenly fashion, with that subtle power that makes eyes weep and hearts quiver in response, and the music stirred the child's whole nature as she moved to its soft sweet sounds and kept time to its fantastic rhythm.

Già watched her with satisfied eyes and dismissed her with a curt word. She went silently away from his presence with the memory of those wonderful melodies in her brain and echoing in her ears.

She stole out into the moonlight and dropped on the grass, spent and panting after her exertions. All was quiet around her; the dew was falling in the cups of wild flowers and silvering the stems of the spearlike grasses; a distant stream gleamed through the dim shadows of the trees and spread itself in darkling pools and caught the moonrays in its depths, where the fish were stirring the great snowy lilies and tangled webs of weeds.

Her breathing grew quicker. The intense

stillness and beauty of the night, all crowned with stars and fragrant with sweetness, stole like a spell over her senses and hushed them to a kindred calm.

She had long been friendless and desolate; she was ill-fed and heavily tasked; she was ignorant as the untaught peasants around her, and yet she could feel in every sight and sound of nature a beauty to which they were blind—a language to which they were deaf; for Nature had made her a poet, though man would have had her a slave. Lying here she was content, and content meant happiness to her. The shadows, the lights, the luminance of moon and stars, the murmur of distant waters, the balmy breath of the midsummer night—all held for her a vague entranced delight. With a strange unaccountable impulse she lifted up her young sweet voice, and wedding the melodies she had so lately heard to the childish words of her own fancy, she sang a strange little song, clear and sweet as a bird's in the dawn of spring.

The sound floated out on the moonlit silence, penetrated the closed door of her tyrant's home, and startled the old man as he leant over his

scanty fare till he forgot food and place and all around, and rose and moved to the doorway to listen.

He could see no one, but Già, glancing impatiently at his restless face, muttered:

"Psh! What do you seek there? It is only the child; she makes that noise often enough. I am sick of it. Come, shut the door and finish your supper. I'll stop her mouth quick enough when I've done mine."

"Stop her mouth! What do you mean? Do you know that voice is a possession worth a hundredfold of your dancing tricks and *pas* and *pirouettes?* Are you a fool, Già, to shut your ears to such a gift like that? Do you know what it may be to her in after years?"

"No; nor do I care!" retorted Già roughly. "What is it to me? I have my own plans for the girl, and she knows better than to thwart them!"

"But, Già," pleaded the old man earnestly, "think of the gain to yourself. If the child's feet can bring her hundreds that voice will bring her thousands. Surely you are not fool enough to lose such a chance!"

"How mean you?" he asked curtly, but with a latent eagerness in voice and eyes that the musician noticed, and hastened to feed.

"I mean this. In the great cities a woman's voice is a fortune—to herself maybe—to those who own her for certain. A gift like this little dancer possesses will need but few years' training to perfect. Music is inborn in her. One could see it in the quickness with which she learnt my melodies and made them into song like that"—waving his hand in the direction of the door. "Well, where genius is, the way is clear and easy. Have her taught, educated, for the operatic stage; take her to any *impresario* you please, and for the rest of your life, friend Già, always supposing your claims on her person are the strongest, you may live like a prince at her cost."

The Italian's eyes glittered, and for a moment he maintained strict silence. Then he burst into a loud harsh laugh.

"Ah, you talk—you talk, friend Marco; but who is to know the worth of your opinion? You are so music mad yourself, you fancy you see a kindred spirit in every untutored beggar's brat upon your way. No, no. I cannot pay for

training and teaching. I want my money's worth soon, and in a few years more she will get it me; but as for your system—why, I should need the gold of a prince first to place her where they teach singers."

"Not so. Let any great *maestro* hear her, and he will be of my opinion, I know, and for the mere speculation of the thing would advance what he is safe to be repaid hereafter. Such things are common enough in other lands besides this."

Già laughed.

"True enough. Many a beggar's brat has been lifted from the gutter and set the world ablaze with wonder at a voice. But the chance is too venturesome for me, Marco; neither do I choose to share with another the profit she may bring. No; let her be as she is."

The old musician sighed heavily and took his seat again at the rough table.

"Will you let me teach her?" he asked presently.

A shout of laughter greeted the question.

"You! Why, Marco, are you dreaming? Were you ever a *maestro* yourself? Did you ever

keep a lyrical aviary and cage wild birds for Art's sake or—your own? Ha! ha! ha!"

The old withered face flushed, and Marco drew up his aged form with a sudden grace of dignity that silenced the man's rude mocking.

"You know nothing of my past," he said quietly. "I was not always what you have known me."

"I doubt it not. You have had your wild dreams and paid for them. And Art has served you well, Marco; for you have neither house, nor home, nor friends, nor wealth, and your years outnumber mine a full score."

The old man sighed.

"It is true," he said sadly. "Nevertheless, Già, I am her slave and follower still. But it needs not to discuss my affairs now. What I know I would teach willingly, if you are willing."

"And your recompense?"

"Nothing."

Già laughed aloud.

"With such views, friend Marco," he said presently, "I marvel not that your pockets are empty and your roof the sky. Did you always spend your labours on others, and starve your

body to feed their souls? Of a surety you are wise!"

"What can it matter to *you?*" was the curt rejoinder. "I lived—I was happy. Can the greatest say more than that?"

"And what would you teach the child?" asked Già, after a moment's silence.

"I would train her voice—it is beautiful. I would teach her so well that were any accident to befall her limbs, or any circumstance oppose your views, she still might earn the gold you covet, and win the fame I have lost."

The simple words were uttered with a dignity so calm, an assurance so perfect, that the rough taunts of Già were for once silenced.

"Well, do as you will," he said roughly. "Only mind, I pay naught for this folly, and I keep her to my own ways still."

"May I tell her?"

"Send her in and bid her go to roost. The hour is late enough."

And with this ungracious permission he walked away into the inner apartment of his dwelling-place and left Marco to seek the child if he wished.

The old man went out into the quiet moonlight

and gazed about for the little songstress. Around him were woods and fields full of deep dreamy odours, while the vast expanse of country stretched on either side calm and still and fragrant as the night.

Seeing no sign of the child, he wandered on till he stood up to his knees in the dewy grasses and saw the radiance of the moon shining back from the surface of the water at his feet. Then, and then only, he paused, subdued and gladdened, too, by the beauty around, feeling in this hour some of the sweetness of freedom, the idleness and rest which his life had so little known.

As he stood he saw the child for whom he had been searching, standing a short distance off in the shadows of the trees. Her hands were clasped, her head thrown back, her eyes fixed on the splendour of the shining heavens, her senses lulled by the trancelike loveliness of earth and sky.

In some dim, imperfect way, that solemn loveliness, that mysterious beauty, that melancholy lustrous charm which wraps all southern nights as in a mantle of enchantment, stirred her young soul, and spoke to her with the language so many human ears are too deaf to hear.

She heard it. And the old man watching her heard it too, and they stood there apart, and yet drawn together by some mysterious sympathy which lay in the old world-worn heart of the one, and the struggling awakening soul of the other.

He came up to her after a time, and spoke very gently and quietly, as if fearful of disturbing the long unchildlike thoughts that held her so strangely still.

"You think it beautiful?" he asked her.

She started, and looked up at his face, but the kindly questioning eyes gave her courage.

"I do not know," she said simply; "I can only feel."

For the little mind was so sadly ignorant, and the little beating, breaking heart knew only its own loneliness, and felt only the truths of nature as something utterly apart from the cruelty of man!

"It is better to feel without knowing, than to know without feeling," the old man answered her.

She looked at him silently with those great wonderful eyes that held such perfect truth in their soft depths.

"I always come out here when I can," she said gently; "but at night I love it best."

"You were singing just now, were you not?"

"Yes; I cannot forget your music; it comes whether I will or no."

"You love music too?"

"Is *that* love?"

She asked it so sadly and simply that the old man's eyes grew dim with pity for one so utterly friendless and ignorant.

"Yes," he said. "The feelings that you cannot describe, but which prompt your feet to obey and your voice to echo the melodies you hear, are born of some inward desire of which you are dimly conscious, just as you are conscious of the beauty of the night, the lulling calm of wind and water, the scents and breath of flowers. These feelings you have instinctively, and the feelings that give you a poet's nature may also give you an artist's genius."

She looked at him wonderingly, not comprehending his words, but following their meaning as a blind man might grope his way through a new and strange thoroughfare.

"You do not understand yet," said Marco,

smiling kindly down at her bewildered face. "Some day you will know better what I mean. Should you like me to teach you to sing?"

"Does it need teaching? Are the birds taught?"

"No; but though it seems as natural to you to raise your voice in song as it is to them, yet your gift by culture and care might become a great and glorious one, might benefit your life hereafter and give you a happiness you little dream of now."

"Happiness?" said the child dreamily, "what is that? Lisa talks of it sometimes; she says, when Già beats her, the saints will atone for it afterwards, and bring her to a place of happiness. Do you mean to take me there?"

"You will go in God's good time, my child. I could not take you if I would. But happiness sometimes finds its way to earth—we need not always go to the saints above to find it."

"Astra and Léla say it is happiness not to be beaten, and to wear fine clothes like the children of the great nobles, and to have plenty to eat and drink. Is that so?"

"For such minds as Astra's and Léla's, yes.

For such minds as yours, maybe, no. Happiness is the one thing that every mortal on this earth is ever searching for; if discovered, to lose."

"Have you found it?"

"I? No. It has come to me in dreams as it comes to most mortals, but it ever deserted my waking moments."

"Shall I find it ever, do you think?"

"I know not," said the old man dreamily. "When God made man he gave him every good gift of earth for his own use. He blessed him in mind and body. He gave him sense to appreciate the beauty that His bounteous hand has strewn broadcast over the face of the world; but He withheld one thing, lest man should give no thought to Him, nor ever turn in prayer or gratitude to the Creator and Giver of all. And He said, 'When man has found love and desire and possession and fame and honour and wealth, and still in his heart is sad and in his soul unsatisfied, then shall he turn to Me in remembrance and in faith for the one blessing I have withheld.'"

"And that is——?"

"Happiness."

"It is not in the world then?"

"We think so sometimes; there is a shadow of it; a mirage that leads many to believe it real, but it fades at the moment we grasp it. It recedes farther and farther into the realms of the future, or mocks us from the background of a misused past."

He spoke to himself more than to the child, but she tried to follow his meaning.

"Have you ever found it?" she asked.

"I thought so—once. I am older now, and—wiser."

"Does music make you happy? When you played you did not look sad and stern as you do now."

"Music is my one joy. I have lived for it, loved it, served it, and though poorly recompensed, my allegiance is unshaken still."

"What will you teach me? Will Già permit it?"

"Assuredly yes. I gained his consent before telling you of my purpose. You do not want to grow to womanhood ignorant and uneducated, do you? If I teach you music I may also teach you other things. Education is the best gift I could

offer you, even were I as rich and famous as I am poor and forgotten."

Her eyes kindled, her face flushed. She turned to him with a new light on her face and a new ring in her young sweet voice.

"You are kind—very kind. I will do all you wish and tell me; but you are sure it is Già's will?"

"Sure, otherwise I had not told you what would raise false hopes in your breast, little one!"

She drew a long deep breath, and stood silently there beside him, drinking in all the wonder of this new thought, which promised such marvellous changes in the dark, coarse, ignorant life she had led.

"I thank you," she said softly, laying her hands in his with a sweet and simple grace that was infinitely touching. "I should like to learn anything that would give me some hope of a life different to this."

"And, God knows, I will do my best to give it you," he said fervently. "And now, child, go within; the hour is late."

The habit of obedience was too innate in her

for either word or look of remonstrance. She merely touched the worn and aged hands she held lightly with her lips, and flitted away through the moonlit shadows, leaving him alone by the water's side.

"If I have done well or ill to-night, I know not," he said softly to himself. "The good God will prove it in the time to come."

And with slow and lagging steps he followed the child into the house, and lay down to rest on the rough sheepskins that Già had appointed as his couch for the night.

But Quità, in her little loft under the eaves, fell asleep and dreamed of all fair and gentle things such as her life had never known, while her little body ached with fatigue, and her closed eyes were wet with tears. But in sleep she had no sorrow and no fear, and strange and wonderful visions haunted the little brain that neither brutality, nor ignorance, nor hardship had been able to dull into acquiescence.

Across the darkness and misery of her life one single ray of hope had fallen—one single ray, that fate or circumstance might shape into a blaze of radiance or darken with eternal gloom.

CHAPTER III.

By humanity's home at the root of the springs
And with reachings of Thought
We reach down to the deeps.—*E. B. Browning.*

PÈRE JEROME left the dining-room that night, to all outward appearances, as calm and unmoved as usual. He had exerted all his powers to entertain and charm the two young men, both of whom he so cordially detested in his heart; and then, when the long and stately meal was over, had withdrawn with a frank smile and a remark that they would doubtless prefer the charms of music to the garrulous chatter of an old man. But when he had passed into his own room, and there were no eyes to see or watch, a dark frown contracted his brows; the suave handsome face looked very evil.

Belonging to a church that masks the iron hand with a glove of velvet, that acknowledges

no defeat, and breaks what it cannot bend, Father Jerome hated to confess, even to himself, that he was opposed, baffled, defied.

Ere he had come to Strathavon the mischief had begun.

While Cecil was yet a boy, the indifference with which he was treated by his father and brother had laid the seeds for the harvest of insubordination that had sprung up in later years. Left very much to himself, he had made the acquaintance of an old Protestant clergyman in a neighbouring parish—a gentle, homely, scholarly man, who, pleased with the boy's frank intelligence and quick appreciation, had taught and talked to him, and made religion appear so different a thing to the involved and tortuous doctrines of the Romish Church, the empty formula of prayers and penances, the fantastic symbolism of masses and festal celebrations, that Cecil's mind turned eagerly to such pure and simple doctrines—doctrines which paved the way for further research and more earnest investigation as years passed over his head, and doubts and speculations brought only disbelief and impatience in their train.

For long those feelings slumbered unknown and unsuspected by his own family, and when at last he declared himself in open revolt against their long-cherished opinions and avowed his dereliction from the faith of his family and race, it was too late for strong measures; and Père Jerome, who was then at Strathavon, had taken into his hands the mission of subjugating and reclaiming this erring son. A man of great learning and infinite tact, devoted to his order, ambitious and unscrupulous, gifted with courtly manners and all outward graces and fascinations, it had seemed to him that the task would be easy enough. But neither theological arguments, nor specious reasoning, nor all his knowledge of human nature and human minds, had yet enabled him to make one step on the way of his purpose. Cecil was too keen-sighted to be blinded by any subtlety of argument, too self-restrained to lose his temper at the irony or mockery that ridiculed his new opinions, too fearless to be intimidated, too indifferent to worldly advantages to be bribed.

Still, so long as he did not fully declare himself an adherent of another church, Père Jerome was far from despairing of ultimate success. He

had so much subtle network to throw around the frank, careless, bold young life, so many instruments and agents to work out his schemes, that it seemed to him impossible but that success would come with time. He had only to work and wait. Yet to-night he was conscious of a furious irritation against Cecil and his friend that usurped all calm reasoning, and turned the patience of philosophy into the impulses of baffled passion.

To and fro he paced his room, his brain restless, his mind disturbed.

"It will be only a woman who can coerce him," he said at last. "The question is how far to trust her?"

He threw himself down and relapsed into thought. Presently his brow cleared. He drew writing materials towards him, and carefully and slowly traced a few lines on paper. These he enclosed in an envelope, which he sealed and then re-enclosed in another directed to the head of a Romish seminary in Paris.

"I can see her handiwork already," he murmured complaisantly, as he laid the letter down and passed his hand over his brow. "He is

abstracted and restless; his spirits are fitful; his dreams have a living embodiment that renders them tame and cold and spiritless; he is struggling against a fascination which alternately repels and attracts; the war between the passions of the heart and the desires of the soul is raging within his breast. For once he confides nothing to his friend. In that I see the first wedge of her influence. Either he is ashamed, or her power restrains him. Well, she has done us good service before now; surely she can be trusted to do this. She has proved herself remorseless and unscrupulous, caring neither for what she risks nor what she costs. This would be a triumph indeed. But she must not know that she is used as a tool. Fortunately she is above the weaknesses of most women. She is cold and heartless, despite her beauty and her triumphs. Yes, the task must be hers. Let her give him the madness she has given to others; let her hold him sure and certain in that perilous bondage she can so well weave; and surely the rest should be easy. Those who love her lose most of their wisdom whilst the trance lasts; ambition becomes worthless, life irksome, art a weariness. Would

she but act as I wish now, young Cecil would be ours, hand and foot, ere many months have passed; but for once she seems inactive. The idea of a woman with her power, her beauty, her fascinations, writing to me: 'I cannot keep him'! Well, she will be watched too. We cannot afford to lose so useful a tool."

"Billiards or music?" asked Lord Danvers laughingly, as the last ember of his cigar died out in the moonlit terrace, and he and Cecil paused in their regular pacing up and down.

'Whichever you please," said his friend. "Last night it was billiards."

"As much as to say to-night let it be music. You make a good listener, Cis; but I fear I bore you sometimes."

"Are you fishing for compliments? You must know pretty well by this time that you can never do that. Talking of 'boring,' Vere, don't stand on ceremony a moment when you are weary of Strathavon. There are the glories of the season awaiting you in town; it is really awfully good of you to put up with this dull life."

"I thought we were above talking such non-

sense, Cis? Dull! Didn't I tell you I wanted a rest after knocking about so long? Besides, I have all my speeches to think of for the forthcoming election. You have no idea what noble orations I have composed in the solitude of these woods."

Cecil smiled slightly.

"It seems a good joke to think of you among those benches of solemnities," he said.

"Say rather that arena of proudest conquests," exclaimed Lord Danvers, "where one can fight one's way upward single-handed to success, and feel proud of one's triumph. That is a different matter to stepping into a party and walking along the road of ready-paved opinions."

"I never have troubled my head about politics," said Cecil carelessly; "and I never shall now. It seems to me that patriotism is but a cloak for one of two passions: vanity or ambition. Party prejudices outweigh so often all purer motives; craft conceals the designs of selfishness, and oratory veils the basest motives with a brilliance that sweeps away sober judgment."

"Do you deny that great statesmen have not been also true patriots?"

"Deny it? No! But to the generality of politicians the best possible good for the country whose honour is in their keeping, seems but a secondary consideration to their own ambition, their passion for office, or the peculiar idiosyncrasy of their own views."

"That is a sweeping accusation, the result more of prejudice than thought," said Lord Danvers good-humouredly. "Of course the bias of one mind may materially affect others, if that one is stronger, loftier, and more adapted to rule. False positions and errors have disgraced all governments at some period or another, and at a crisis of importance the fate of a country has not unfrequently hung on the lips of one man. But at such times I think all lower passions and ambitions have given way to the intense desire to be true to what is right and just, to maintain with honour all the responsibilities of national glory. The true patriot cannot be lowered by failure or ennobled by rewards. He acts and speaks disinterestedly, and is great in the true sense of that word."

"I have not denied it. I merely say he is rarely found. But if we are to stand here and

argue I shall have no music, and I prefer that to all questions of party and policy."

"Have you neither yourself?"

"No; you know that. An heroic sovereignty, a soilless fame, an unimpeachable integrity, a stainless honour—what party can show you these?"

"You ask too much of life, or rather of human nature, Cecil. Dissatisfaction lies at the root of all things. To those who 'strive towards the light,' yet never reach it, there can indeed be no enjoyment that brings forgetfulness, no goal which promises content. Well, let us see what music can do to charm away our gravity or rather gloom, for you look as if the latter were your portion, though it is ungrateful of you to blame fate yet. There have been few thorns among your roses, I should say."

Leaning against the sill of the open window, with the scents of the summer night moving on the air, and the massive solemn harmonies of a cathedral chant filling all the room with sound, Cecil gave himself up to such supreme enjoyment of the moment, and the meditative charm that filled it, as only a nature gifted, sensitive, and intellectual can give itself up.

Many scenes and memories thronged to his brain as these solemn mystical notes rolled out in measured rhythm. He thought of his lonely boyhood, his dreams, and studies, and pursuits, his early youth, when first those conflicts between reason and superstition had shaken his soul to the very dust and laid in ruins the temple of a bigoted faith.

Cecil Calverley's nature was one which could never be blinded by enthusiasm, however much affected by it for the time. No doctrine could quite satisfy him unless some theory of his own mind reconciled it to reason or united it to those higher and loftier conceptions of what is pure and perfect, which all intelligence that is well trained or naturally gifted essentially craves.

That very artistic and enthusiastic part of his nature which might have seemed to threaten him with danger had been kept in bounds by a desire for research, a bias towards sound philosophy which early training and his own ardent love of learning had fostered. With a little more of the enthusiasm, a less perfect physical organisation, the ardent and imaginative portion would have ruled the reasoning and didactic. But youth, and health, and vigorous intellect combated the weaker element,

and Cecil, who might have been a devotee of the very Church he renounced, suddenly threw aside its trammels and put himself beyond the pale of its membership.

His intellect could never reconcile itself to that complete submission, that narrow subordination which springs from priestly control. Freedom of thought was to him as vital a necessity as freedom of body. A creed or doctrine which appealed to mere credulity and based itself on human authority he could only despise, and the Divine behests as to priestly jurisdiction he declared limited to certain restraints which Rome had long overstepped. Confession, which gives such terrible power to those who extort and enforce it, was to him a stumbling-block which no argument could overcome, and he had to combat that in its most subtle and eloquent forms from the lips of Père Jerome. But the force of superstition, being once broken by education and intelligence, could never again reassert itself. He could not but see much that was grotesque, much that was faulty, much that was impious in the Church he had abandoned. It might be a Church to reward ambition, to foster tyranny, to encourage superstition, to bribe service, to give to unscrupulous

minds and powerful intellects that most dangerous gift of sovereignty over weaker minds, control over lower intellects, which misuses its own power only too often, and despises even what it rules; but was it a Church to beautify religion with the purity of a perfect priesthood, to adore the Godhead it professes to serve, with the creature's reverence, not the equal's effrontery? There lay the foundation-stone of error, the groundwork of a fabric of disbelief, and thereon stood that structure of mingled doubt and resistance which in Cecil Calverley's mind had replaced the tenets of all creeds and doctrines.

These thoughts and memories swept through his mind now as the music rose and swelled through the quiet room, the music of a "Messe Solennelle" that brought back the recollection of swaying censers and gorgeous pageantry and all the festal magnificence of cathedral worship, yet with that memory brought also the old pain and restlessness of a shaken faith, of awakened doubts.

"Why did you play that?" he asked abruptly, as the music ceased at last and his friend came over to his side. "I wanted to be soothed after our priestly controversy at dinner. That music has had just the contrary effect."

"It was just that controversy which put it into my head," said Lord Danvers, leaning out over the broad window-sill and drinking in the soft breath of the summer night with a sigh of enjoyment. "Such music suits a night like this," he went on. "It is a hymn of its own praise—a thanksgiving of its own beauty. If the Church you have deserted has nothing else to be thankful for, at least it has inspired some of the grandest music that master-minds have been able to create. I sometimes think in those far-off ages that life was more real, and religion more a part of men's existence, that there was some truth in their professions—that in the church or the monastery, the world or the retreat, a greater zeal prevailed than does now. Men seem ashamed of their Christianity in these days; they were proud of it then. Of course there were errors, and imperfections, and conceits, but even they had their origin in some grain of a faith nobly conceived—a truth conscientiously felt. It was only when overladen with men's doctrines and conceits that the faith and the truth fell from their original purity, and were so hidden and cloaked by false disguises, that scarcely a vestige of the original element remained."

"It is the craving of ambition—the incessant striving after power that has so deteriorated the priesthood of all denominations. This craving seems to mingle even with the zeal of fanatics."

"And why?" asked Lord Danvers. "Simply because of the awfully insidious tempting of that power, which all authority and control over the minds of others possesses. Exercised in different ways—by different degrees—yet the mainspring is the same in all sects. The Jesuits and Romanists maintain it simply by obtaining a secret influence over the minds of individuals—by pandering to vice, which they use as a scourge, by encouraging feelings and passions which subordinate the mind to the body, the soul to the will. If Protestantism is a purer doctrine, yet that craving for superiority is gradually creeping into its apparent simplicity. Hence the Ritualistic tendencies of the day—the desire for superiority, not only over the masses who form a congregation, but the 'inferior' orders of the clerical body. Why inferior? I often ask. Bishop, rector, vicar, curate, serving professedly one great Master, preaching humility, bidding all men despise pomp and show and worldly vanities, where do we find them exemplifying their own doctrines? No greater sticklers for social position and place exist."

"I fear our experience has been an unfortunate one," said Cecil thoughtfully. "I suppose there is bad as well as good in all professions, even that which should be greatest and loftiest, and to which single-heartedness of life, and purity of soul, alone should be incentives to adopting. As long as benefices and preferments and utility form motives sufficient for entering the Church of England, we must look out for lip-service, and expect a wide margin allowed between precept preached and precept practised. After all, how happily constituted are those individuals who accept everything without question, and to whom belief is a mere matter of—constitution."

"A class to which we could never belong, though," laughed Lord Danvers. "Reason may be a dangerous gift, but never a useless one. In most minds, though, I think there is an element of materialism which is the hardest opponent faith has to combat—a something which asks proof or satisfaction ere giving in to the tenets of any doctrine. Doubts are hard things to combat, and spring up hydra-headed in congenial soil. The accident of birth is too often the sole thing responsible for any creed or form of faith. What we are taught, what our parents and ancestors

have believed, is, in too many cases, the sole groundwork of a life's religion. To think, to argue, to investigate is a task needing both courage and intelligence, and one also that too often shakes a preconceived faith to its very foundation. Why trouble to do this? It is often the question we ask, seldom the question we answer—the origin of doubts few have strength to investigate; for all men are not alike, and creeds and opinions are not unfrequently the result of chance, of some special enthusiasm or peculiarity of temperament."

"Human nature is a mystery," said Cecil with a sigh.

"Ay, and a mystery to which there is no individual key. We do not even understand ourselves; how, then, can we understand each other? Ah Cecil, ere you have reached my years, or gained half my experience, you too may have learnt that in human life there is so much that is pathetic, yet so much that is vile—so much that is sublime, yet so much that is weak, that nothing short of an Infinite Pity can judge of its imperfections—nothing but an Infinite Love can pardon its manifold errors!"

END OF VOL. I.

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